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OR,

The Last Man of Keno Bar.

A TALE OF CRYSTAL CITY.

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TEN PARDS," "VELVET FOOT," "CAPTAIN
CUTLASS," "ROUGH ROB," "SILKEN
LASSO," "FELIX FOX," "TEXAS
TRUMP," "PHIL FLASH,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

SOME DARK WORK.

It was nearly high noon, and the hot rays of
a summer sun were falling upon a wild but pic-
turesque landscape in Arizona.

Over a tolerably well-worn trail an old-fash-
ioned mail and passenger stage, drawn by four

"MY NAME IS KIT KING, AND I AM THE LAST MAN OF KENO BAR!" AND HE HELD
ALOFT THE HALF-BURNT BOWIE.

Rare

good horses, bowled heavily, and every now and then the whip of the driver cracked like pistol-shots over the heads of the lead grays.

The stage had but one passenger, and he was a man of about thirty, with a muscular figure, dark eyes that were quick and restless, long black hair, and a mustache that corresponded.

As the weather was extremely warm at that hour, he had discarded his coat, and was lying half-asleep on the dusty cushion in his shirt-sleeves.

The landscape had no charms for him; he had probably seen it a dozen times; he did not seem to care whether the stage landed him soon at his destination or not.

The single passenger had a good deal of time on his hands.

"Hello, thar!" suddenly exclaimed a voice, that roused him, and a glance upward showed him the face of the driver.

"Well, what is it now?" asked the passenger.

"We're nearin' the Bar, an' thar's a flock o' vultures hoverin' in ther vicinity."

The last words more than the first roused the man in the stage. He got up and clambered to the driver's seat, and shaded his eyes with his hand, for the sun was beating in his face.

"I hope we'll find ther Bar all hunk, but I don't like them birds," continued the driver, indicating by a sweep of his hand the dark specks which he knew so well to be the vultures of the Arizona plains. "You don't know when you're safe hyer for ther infernal reds, an' ef they let yer alone, ye're liable ter be swooped down on by ther Greasers from ther border. Them vultures, sir—"

"Hang the birds!" interrupted the handsome passenger. "Whip up and get me to Keno Bar as soon as possible."

The long whip cracked and the driver sung out lively to the horses, which took new life as it were and increased their gait.

For several miles the two men on the stage said nothing, but watched the dark birds that made their silent circles high up in the rarefied air of that region. Each seemed to have peculiar thoughts, but the passenger in his shirt-sleeves was the most interested, for every now and then his lips met under his black mustache and his eyes seemed to throw arrows of rage at the birds.

"When we mount that rise, sir, we'll see Keno Bar," the driver said, speaking for the first time in three miles.

"I think not," was the reply, and the speaker looked at the vultures now almost directly overhead. "Those air coyotes ought to tell you that there is no such place."

Five minutes later the stage reached the summit of a considerable rise, and at the first glance over the valley that lay beyond, the driver let slip an exclamation of horror.

"Thar is no Bar, sure enough!" he cried.

The man at his elbow said nothing, only his face grew darker and his hands closed madly.

"Looks as if they got 'em all," continued the driver. "I don't see a sign o' life about ther old camp."

"All?" echoed the passenger. "How many were there?"

"Twenty-one—all men. Keno didn't seem ter hev any use for women."

The stage bowled down the smooth and gradual descent, and at length the driver reined in his horses where a little camp had once stood.

Now not a cabin was to be seen, but five heaps of ashes told the location of that many mountain huts.

"How long do you stop here?" asked the passenger.

"As long as you like. If Keno war all hunk, we'd stop an hour, but I leave it all ter you, as it is. You war goin' ter leave me hyer?"

"Yes," said the passenger, as he sprung to the ground. "Keno Bar was my destination, but it couldn't shelter a coyote now."

The driver climbed down after his passenger. The ruins of the little camp seemed to attract him.

"Injun work! see!" he said, picking from the edge of an ash-heap a half-burned arrow, and holding it up to his passenger's gaze.

The young man turned away with a glance, and with a stick which he had found, began to scatter the ashen ruins of the first cabin he reached.

"Thet man had friends hyer," murmured the driver as he watched him. "He wouldn't leave Albuquerque for a hole in the geography like Keno war for nothin'. He's ther first passenger I've brung hyer in six months, an' now he finds Keno gone up ther flume. It's pretty hard, but it's one o' ther incidents ov life in ther Southwest."

For some time the searching efforts of the passenger revealed nothing, but all at once the stick struck something that apparently rewarded him.

The next moment he had fished from the ruins a seven-inch bowie with the wooden hilt nearly burned away.

"That is something," said the driver coming forward. "It looks like ther owner isn't far off. Them reds—"

"Give the reds a rest!" growled the passenger. "We're not trying the doers of this work just now," and he went to work with the stick once more.

In a little while he had unearthed an object that told a darker story than the bowie. This was a half burned boot and in it, too hideous to inspect, were the remains of a human foot!

"Mebbe the hull twenty-one ar' hyer!" exclaimed the driver.

That seemed to be the passenger's idea exactly.

He went from ruin to ruin and from among the ashes of each cabin he fished human remains, burned beyond recognition, but human for all that.

"How many?" asked the driver when the passenger turned from the last ash-heap holding the bowie in his hand while a dark expression had settled over his handsome face.

"Twenty-one," was the sententious reply.

"Injuns, eh?"

"Time will answer that question."

"I'm dog-goned sorry. Thar war some good men in Keno."

"Good men?" echoed the passenger with spirit. "Better never lived! I intended to stop here, but what is the use?"

"You had friends at ther Bar?" asked the driver.

"They were all my friends. How far do you call it to Crystal City?"

"Thirty miles."

"No stops between?"

"Nary a stop."

Before he spoke again the passenger turned toward the scene of desolation and looked steadily at it for five minutes.

His body did not move; it stood like a bronze statue in the broiling sun; his face was shaded by the broad brim of his soft Panama.

The old driver stepped back and regarded him from a respectful distance.

"If that man takes a notion ter pay ther reds for this work, thar soon will be few Injuns for Uncle Sam to feed," he muttered as he watched him.

The next moment the silent passenger turned suddenly and came toward the driver.

"I'll go on to Crystal City," he said. "My name is Kit King, and I am the Last Man of Keno Bar!" and he held aloft the half-burnt bowie.

"Jehu!" exclaimed the driver. "Do you tell me that you belong ter these burnt-out diggin's?"

"Yes," came from between the lips that did not seem to part to let it through. "Remember that to no person do you impart the information that Kit King of Keno Bar still lives. The fiends who did this work think they made a clean sweep of it. They killed twenty-one men. I don't know where the twenty-first man came from, but I will find out."

"Ther Injuns—" began the driver.

"Who accuses the Indians?" flashed the Last Man. "Climb up to your seat! We are off for Crystal City!"

The stage was on the move again.

CHAPTER II.

BULLION BURKE AND SHADOW.

As the crow flies it was twenty miles from Keno Bar to Crystal, but as the trail ran it was thirty.

Crystal City had the usual reputation that attaches itself to nearly all mining-towns in the wild Southwest. It was a hard place.

The person who looks for a paradise in Arizona sooner or later finds himself mistaken. Where men carry their hearts on their sleeves and deadly weapons in their belts, goodness is not the ruling principle.

Such was the case with Crystal City, a well-known mining-town with the mountains around it and plenty of desperate men within.

It was known far and wide as the home of one Bullion Burke, a handsome man who was the self-constituted alcalde of the place, and who was said to rule in Crystal City with a hand as firm as the hand of the czar.

The gold-diggings and their alcalde were inseparable; men never talked of one without mentioning the other.

With piercing black eyes and a striking face, with the form of an Apollo, and long black hair that fell over his shoulders in glossy but uncoiled ringlets, Bullion Burke was the man to attract attention anywhere.

Having once seen him no one wondered at his wonderful control over the men whom circumstances had made his associates. It was doubted whether there was a man in Crystal City who would not, at the lifting of this man's hand, walk cheerfully to certain death.

Nobody knew anything concerning his past history, nobody in the camp seemed anxious to find out, for there, as elsewhere in the West, everybody attended strictly to his own business.

Night was settling over Crystal City while Kit King was nearing it in the stage, and Bullion Burke walked from the Mountain Dew Hotel with a freshly-lighted cigar between his teeth.

The desperado sport was not alone.

His companion was a little hunchback, who hardly reached to the alcalde's shoulders. This misshapen piece of humanity had a dark skin and restless eyes; his arms were long like the arms of an ape, and there was nobody in Crystal City foolish enough to call him even passably good-looking.

Strange to say, this being was the handsome sport's companion. Wherever Bullion Burke went, this man went too, like a dog that follows his master. Some hidden tie seemed to connect the strangely-mated pair, and there were some who whispered in the dark that the deformed was the alcalde's brother!

On the evening in question, Bullion Burke and the dwarf went from the hotel to the best house in Crystal City, and having passed to a room, the sport turned abruptly to his companion:

"Well, what have you found out?" he asked.

"More than you bargained for, perhaps," grinned the dwarf. "They are actually lovers—"

Bullion Burke's sudden start forward made the deformed break his own sentence.

"Has it come to this?" exclaimed the sport. "I see now where I've played the fool. I don't want any guesswork here, Zocco. I want hard-pan truth."

"When did I ever lie?" said the dwarf. "There is another place for me when Bullion Burke laughs at my word."

"Don't go off like powder. I meant nothing," protested Burke quickly. "I ought not to be much surprised at this state of affairs. I helped to bring it about. But go on. Border Berta loves him, you say?"

"Yes."

"Is that all?"

"They are going to leave Crystal City within two weeks."

"The—Old Harry!" cried Bullion Burke. "Goin' to give me the slip, eh?"

The dwarf nodded.

"When he goes, it will be to the little cemetery on the mountain-side!" grated the alcalde.

"Did you leave them together?"

"Yes, captain."

"At her cabin?"

"Yes."

An exclamation of rage dropped from Bullion Burke's lips as he started madly toward the door.

"He won't go," muttered the dwarf, looking at him. "He will come back and send somebody else."

Sure enough, as if to confirm the hunchback's words, Bullion Burke suddenly came back. He had changed his mind.

"Zocco, you said once that you would do anything for me," he said, looking into the dwarf's eyes, glittering like a serpent's only a few feet away. "I need not tell you that I once did you a good turn—you know that."

"The captain knows that he has but to give the word for Zocco to die for him. Let him put the hunchback to the test."

"Not now, not now," laughed Bullion Burke. "My enemies are yours, ar' they not, Zocco?"

"Yes. Zocco hates to the death the man who hates the captain. He shall feel this which never stings twice!" and there was laid upon the rough table between the two men a long-bladed knife that had a needle-like point and a stiletto hilt.

This was enough to show that the dark-faced dwarf was a dangerous man, and nobody knew this better than the person whose eyes glittered when they saw the knife.

"More than one mortal has felt that, I suspect," smiled Bullion Burke, glancing again at the knife, and then fixing his eyes upon Zocco he lowered his voice and continued:

"This young tree in my way—this snapping

coyote, Zocco, I want him done for. My hand must not be seen in the play unless—unless he plays his little game before the whole camp, and brings me to ridicule. If he does that I will show him the flash that follows the pressing of a trigger. I am the acknowledged master here, an' by the Fates! master I shall be. Hark! Did you hear that?"

The hunchback sprung up and went to the door.

"It was nothing," he said, coming back.

Nothing, was it?

At that moment a human figure glided from the cabin door and was soon lost among the shadows of the silent street.

If Zocco or his master had followed this person he would have seen him enter a small and rather neat house not far from the Mountain Dew Hotel, and surprise a beautiful girl of seventeen, who caught sight of his face and turned pale.

"He knows," said the youth, who might have been several years older than the girl. "The boss of Crystal City knows that we intend to fly."

For a moment the beautiful girl looked helpless before some gigantic peril. She seemed about to fall back in a swoon.

"Who—told—him?" she asked, in gasps.

"The serpent of the camp; his infernal, misshapen shadow!" grated the youth. "I have just come from the door of his shanty; I have heard Zocco tell his master that we were about to bid Crystal City farewell."

"And he?—what did he say?"

"That we should never go," was the reply.

"He came toward the door, as if about to face us with the hunchback's revelation, but second thought sent him back to his shadow, whose yellow throat I'd like to have in my clutch at this moment."

The youth's eyes glowed like fire-balls as he finished, and he thrust out his hand and shut it spasmodically, as if it already clutched the throat he coveted.

"Jack, the game is up," said the girl. "I have placed you in a dangerous position. From this moment Bullion Burke is the worst enemy you can have, and with his shadow to help him, nothing will be too mean for him."

"Don't despair. Let me bear the blame of this flight," said the youth promptly. "I knew Bullion Burke before it was proposed. I know him yet. I would not have stayed a day in Crystal City, had it not been for the hopes I had of learning something about my father's fate. We need not wait a week; we can go now before the two pards can form a plan against us. My father is lost forever."

"Can we go to-night?" asked the girl, joy appearing in the depths of her deep-blue eyes.

"Would to heaven we could, Jack!"

"We can and we will!" was the exclamation that greeted her.

"Trust all the arrangements to me, Berta. I will be here within thirty minutes, with everything ready. When the infamous Alcalde of Crystal City lifts his hand to strike, his victims will be far away."

A minute later the girl's companion had vanished, and she was alone.

He walked toward the Mountain Dew Hotel, and reached it just as a stage drawn by four horses drew up in front of it, and the driver halloed out, "Crystal City" loud enough to rouse the dead in the little cemetery near by on the mountain.

The coming of the stage to Crystal City was an event that did not excite much comment. It generally brought passengers—who for the most part journeyed on—and some mail.

A few men, miners and roughs, awaited the arrival of the stage before the hotel, and the youth was about to move on when the door of the vehicle opened, and the only passenger stepped out.

"Thar's a new shiner," said one of the spectators in low but audible tones. "I wonder if he has any dust for the banks."

A man who came to Crystal City without dust for the faro banks was regarded as a poor visitor; the sports there were always on the outlook for some pigeon to pluck.

Jack had never seen the passenger before, to his knowledge. He was tall, well formed, and as handsome as Bullion Burke himself. His hat was an elegant Panama, and from beneath its brim glanced a pair of eyes that seemed to see everything.

"I like that man," unconsciously muttered the youth. "I wish I had him for a friend just now."

At that moment something clicked behind him, and turning quickly, he saw a flash in the

eyes of a man called Cactus Claude, and a glance downward showed a half-drawn six-shooter in the cool blade's hand.

Who was the stage's passenger?

Cactus Claude was eying him like a tiger.

CHAPTER III.

"THE TIGER'S CLAWS."

"We will not go to-night," said Jack, reappearing suddenly to the young girl who had remained in the cabin. "A new man has just come in with the stage, and something tells me that he is here on important business. You are not afraid to face Bullion Burke, Berta?"

"Afraid of that man?" cried the girl. "Not for any harm he can do me, but for you—"

"I will take care of myself," interrupted the youth, with a light and fearless laugh.

"What is this new man like?" asked Border Berta, whose early history, it was said, nobody knew but the Alcalde of Crystal City, and perhaps his dwarf pard Zocco.

"He is good-looking, with dark eyes, long hair, and a black mustache like Bullion Burke's. I believe he is handsomer than the alcalde, and every whit as cool."

"What does he call himself?"

Berta put her questions in a manner which showed that she had become strangely interested in the new-comer.

"I did not stay to hear," was the reply. "He appeared to be a stranger to everybody but Cactus Claude, the Rolling Stone of the Southwest."

"That man knows everybody; he has been everywhere!" cried the girl. "And he seemed to know the new man?"

"Yes; I heard the click of a revolver's lock behind me, and when I looked back Cactus Claude had his six-shooter half out, and was glaring fiercely at Wild Whip's one passenger."

"Then he knows him! Jack, this stranger must be told that Cactus Claude hates him!" And Berta's words seemed to become an appeal, as she laid her hand on the youth's arm.

"He will find that out, for he has the eye of an eagle. Cactus Claude may have seen him somewhere, and he may have cause to fear the man who has just come."

"Cactus Claude fears neither man nor the devil."

"That is his old boast," smiled Jack. "Berta, you fear that fellow, though."

"I do," acknowledged the girl; "while I am not afraid to face the boss of the Crystal City, I confess that I fear his right hand man, Cactus Claude. There is something about him that is repulsive. It is not the red scar that runs across his cheek and becomes fiery whenever he is in a passion, as you have seen it do a hundred times. I cannot tell you why I hate and fear that man. It seems to me that something happened long ago that furnished me with this deep-seated aversion. I positively shudder in Cactus Claude's presence."

"And yet he does not bother you," answered the youth. "He knows better than to do that. The Rolling Stone is no fool after all, Berta; as long as I have known him he has never shown his claws."

"Excepting to-night when you say he flashed up at sight of Wild Whip's passenger?" smiled the girl.

"It was momentary. He cooled down when I caught his eye, and the visitor walked into the hotel. We will confront Bullion Burke until we know something about the Mountain Dew's guest."

"Very well," assented Border Berta. "The alcalde's dwarf pard has played spy; he has told Burke that we intended to fly from Crystal City. That hunchback is more serpent than human anyhow; his voice is the hiss of the viper."

The girl's eyes grew animated while she spoke.

"I hate him, too," cried Jack. "If I had the the snake here, by heavens! I would throttle him! Maybe I'll get a chance at him one of these days. I'm going down now to learn more about the new guest."

"Look out for the boss of Crystal City! Make no issue with him."

"I will take care of number one," laughed the youth as he left the cabin, and a moment later he was walking from the cabin where he had left Crystal City's one pure woman and even to him an enigma which he could not solve.

The young man directed his steps toward the Mountain Dew Hotel where he expected to find the new-comer.

In front of the building which could not accommodate many guests, he found a crowd of twenty men to whom the stage-driver was describing the present appearance of Keno Bar.

It was Jack's first news of the destruction of

the little mining-camp, and a thrill of horror ran through him as Wild Whip told how the remains of the mountaineers had been found among the ruins of their cabins.

"Injuns!" said the old driver emphatically. "Don't I know Injun work when I see it? Didn't I pick up an arrow thet gave ther hull job away?"

Cactus Claude was one of the listeners on the outside of the crowd, and the youth happened to glance at him when Wild Whip finished his opinion.

A singular twinkle was in the desperado's eyes, and Jack thought he detected a smile at the corners of his mouth, but he was not sure, for the only light he had was that which came from the stars.

Where was the new arrival?

Nobody seemed to be thinking about him, and the men who surrounded the driver cared only for the story of Keno Bar's fate.

"It was a mean hole and its pards war selfish and meaner still," growled one big fellow. "Blamed if it warn't as independent as Russia, and I guess it didn't get any more than it needed."

This sentiment, heartless as it was, seemed to find an echo in the hearts of a majority of the listeners.

Keno Bar had no friends in Crystal City. The two places had never had any friendly communication, as if they were rivals of some kind, and to the knowledge of no one no man from the ill-fated place had ever been seen on the streets of the larger camp.

Bullion Burke was largely responsible for this; he had declared Keno Bar outlawed, and outlawed it accordingly was.

Jack, the youth, felt his indignation rise when he heard the roughs of Crystal City rejoice over the fate of the little camp, but he knew it would not be policy to attempt to stem the tide of opinion.

He left Wild Whip and his audience and walked into the hotel.

The office and bar were all in one, the clerk and bartender were the same person, and the moment he saw the young man he beckoned him to the counter.

"Have you seen 'im yet?" asked the clerk.

"Seen whom?"

"Mr. Christopher Kingsly, the high horse thet came in with Whip a while ago?"

Jack glanced hurriedly around the room which contained half a dozen men at the moment.

"Oh, he isn't here just now; gone out for a walk, I guess," continued the clerk. "He remarked that he might stop here for a good spell, and said that he had nothin' particular on hand. Looks like a man of leisure with plenty of rocks and uncommon good judgment. I directed him to the Tiger's Claws if he wanted any sport and he may be thar now, playin' with the beast you know, Jack."

Tony Timberlake, the clerk of the Mountain Dew, was a shrewd fellow who got a small percentage of the losings of all guests whom he directed to the Tiger's Claws, Crystal City's most noted faro bank, and the reader may rest assured that he lost no time in speaking to Christopher Kingsly of the den.

Jack withdrew.

"Goin' down, eh?" asked the clerk.

"Perhaps."

"Contrive to let the colonel know that Kingsly came from me."

Jack made no reply, but walked out.

"You would direct a man into the jaws of death if you could rake in a little commission," he said indignantly. "You are no better than the rest of them, Tony Timberlake. If I get a chance I'll post Christopher Kingsly about a few things. I know this town as well as the next man."

Not far from the hotel stood the roughly weather-boarded building known as the Tiger's Claws.

It was a faro bank operated by a sleek looking man who was called "the colonel," although some occasionally styled him Arizona Al. The game came into existence with Crystal City; it had grown with its growth, and its reputation had extended far beyond the confines of the camp.

A lamp inclosed in glass hung over the door of the bank, and on three of its sides were rough daubs, supposed to represent the claws of the tiger.

The building itself was not large, but it was quite sufficient for the wants of the colonel's customers, and when Jack entered it, after leaving the hotel, he found the principal game in full blast and Arizona Albert managing it with his usual adeptness and suavity.

The youth's first look was for Christopher Kingsly, but instead of seeing him he saw Cactus Claude, and following the desperado's black eyes, he found the Mountain Dew's new guest looking quietly on at the game.

For ten minutes Cactus Claude continued to eye the stranger, then he suddenly shifted his position and moved toward the door.

"That man means mischief," said Jack to himself as he eyed the ruffian. "There is the devil in his eye, and Kingsly has put him there."

The next moment the youth moved toward the faro table and halted, unperceived, at Kingsly's side.

He looked up and saw the stranger's gaze fixed on the colonel with almost the same look that Cactus Claude had been giving him.

Then Jack glanced at the Rolling Stone and found him at the door, as if about to dart away.

"I'd like to see you," said the youth in a whisper intended only for Kingsly's ears. "If you will follow me within five minutes, you will find me on the outside."

There was no visible sign that the stranger had heard a word of this. He did not even look at the youth, but Jack was certain that his words had not been lost.

He left the table and started toward the door. Cactus Claude was gone, and no noise had attended his departure.

On the outside and in the shadow of the front of the building, Jack halted and waited for Kingsly.

"He certainly heard me," he said to himself. "I whispered loud enough—"

This sentence was broken by the sudden report of a revolver on the inside. With it came a loud cry, and then the loud voices of a dozen men.

The next second the door of the faro bank flew open and Jack rushed forward.

"Stay out!" thundered a voice at his ear as he was thrown back, and a man whom he knew was Cactus Claude sprung into the den.

CHAPTER IV.

THE DEATH MYSTERY.

JACK, the youth, was not disposed to obey the mandate thundered into his ears by Cactus Claude; he did not obey it.

The Rolling Stone of Crystal City had barely crossed the threshold of the faro bank, than Jack too, was inside again.

There was some whitish smoke rising toward the rafters of the place, and the splendid figure of Christopher Kingsly stood erect in the middle of the room.

At the foot of the gambling table lay the body of a large man, and the other occupants of the den stood with cocked revolvers looking over a leveled six-shooter into the cool eyes of the stranger guest.

Jack took in the whole scene in an instant, and missed the face and figure of the proprietor of the bank, Arizona Al.

Could he be the man under the table? Cactus Claude had entered the den like a lion that springs upon a camp of sleeping hunters.

"Did he get the colonel?" he exclaimed, glancing at the body by the table.

"Somebody got him," answered some one.

"That was your shot?" and Cactus Claude came toward Kingsly's revolver, but halted several feet away.

"Do you think so?" asked the new arrival, with a smile at the corners of his lips and then he said seriously. "No, I did not shoot anybody."

The men looked astonished. "How is this?" asked Cactus Claude, turning to the pards. "Did that man thar get ther colonel?"

Nobody seemed willing to answer. "He stepped back just before the shot was fired," one said.

"He had a revolver in his hand when we all jumped up. But he says he didn't drop the colonel."

"That is true, gentlemen," continued Christopher Kingsly. "I held no grudge against the man lying there. He had enemies no doubt, but he was not mine. There are six balls in the revolver, I hold in my hand. I stepped back to leave the house. I cannot say who killed the colonel."

The pards of Crystal City looked nonplused. "He was killed by some one in the house," grated Cactus Claude, with a fierce accusative glance at the stranger.

"I think so," added Kingsly. At this juncture two of the men approached the man on the floor and lifted him up.

"This man isn't dead," suddenly said one, and then there was a surging toward the colonel.

Kingsly did not move forward with the rest, but looked between two men into the bloodless face of the man who had been placed on a bench.

It was evident from the first that Arizona Albert was at the end of life. They forced the hottest brandy in creation down his throat and revived him.

"Do you know who got yer, colonel?" was the question that met him from Cactus Claude's lips. "It's an enigma ter ther crowd. If we get ter ther bottom ov it, by Jehosaphat! thar'll be a plantin' without much ceremony."

The gambler who had been shot in the breast made several efforts to clean his throat; the spectators waited breathlessly during the attempt.

"It was—Coyote," said the colonel, at last, and scarcely above a whisper.

"Coyote?" exclaimed Cactus Claude.

"Who the deuce is Coyote?"

"Coyote," repeated the wounded man. "I—didn't—know—he—war—here."

The Rolling Stone sprung up and wheeled up on the toughs.

"Do any ov yer know who Coyote is?" he exclaimed.

There was no audible response, but several shook their heads. The mystery was deepening.

"Tell us who Coyote is, colonel," said Cactus Claude, going back to the gasping man on the bench. "Ther boys don't seem to know 'im without an explanation."

"Don't know Coyote?" said the colonel, as if a little stronger, and then shutting his teeth hard he added, with a sickly grin: "By Heaven! I know Coyote!"

"Let the man yonder come forward and give the colonel a glimpse of him," suggested somebody, with a glance at Kingsly.

"Thet's an idea! Will he do thet?"

The stranger came forward without any urging, and the crowd parted to let him to the proprietor of the ranch.

"Hyer's a man what just came ter Crystal," said the Rolling Stone, calling the colonel's attention to the person who had halted before him. "He war hyer when ther shootin' war done. Is he Coyote?"

A second elapsed before Arizona Albert saw Crystal City's latest visitor, and when he did his gaze became riveted upon him.

The men leaned forward and held their breath, for they all knew that a life hung upon the dying man's decision.

"I guess we've got Coyote, but I never knew him by thet name," said Cactus Claude to himself.

At that moment the colonel slowly shook his head.

"He isn't Coyote," he said. "I don't know that man."

The pards of Crystal City drew back and exchanged puzzled looks.

"Are you through with me?" asked Kingsly.

"I guess we are," responded several.

"Gentlemen, if I should be wanted, you'll find me at the Mountain Dew," he continued, and the next minute he was leaving the scene.

Almost before he reached the door a death-like gurgle was heard in the colonel's throat, and Cactus Claude stepped back.

"Thet ends it," said the desperado. "We have now ter find out who Coyote is."

He had hardly ceased before the ominous rattle died away, and the proprietor of the Tiger's Claws lay before his nightly customers with the stamp of death on his face.

The news went over the gold town like a flash of wildfire, and Colonel Wonder, as the dead man's real name was, was hardly cold before it was the topic everywhere.

"Tell me all," said Bullion Burke when he had shut the door of his shanty behind himself and Cactus Claude. "You were there when it happened. Who did it?"

"That's a simple an' a natural question, cap'n; but for all that it's a poser," was the reply. "Did you ever hear of Coyote?"

Bullion Burke repeated the name, and shook his head.

"What has Coyote got ter do with the colonel's death?" he asked.

"Everything. He killed him."

The Alcalde of Crystal City then listened while Cactus Claude narrated the mysterious shooting, and, for a wonder, he did not interpose questions to the close.

"I don't more'n half-acquit that man Kingsly," said Claude. "He offered ter let us ex-

amine his revolver, but ther boys took him at his word."

"Who is he?" asked Burke.

"Christopher Kingsly."

"Whar from?"

"I don't know. He came in with Wild Whip ter-night."

"Whar is he?"

"At ther Mountain Dew."

Bullion Burke was silent for a moment.

"Maybe I had better see this man," he said.

"Do you know him?" asked Claude, with a slight start.

"I can't say till I've set my peepers on him," was the reply. "If I don't know him maybe Zocco does, for he knows everybody, or seems ter."

"We'll go down tergether an' look at him," said Claude, and then he laughed: "You ought ter hev heard Whip tell about findin' Keno Bar in ashes, with an Injun arer hyer an' thar. He paints a florid picture, cap'n, an' gives ther reds all ther credit for ther wipin' out."

The alcalde joined in the laugh with which Cactus Claude finished, but he suddenly became serious.

"I don't like this killin' business," he said. "Is this Coyote some secret slayer who is loose for a spell? There were twenty-one at Keno Bar, Cactus."

"Twenty-one."

"What does Wild Whip say about the remains?"

"He an' this man Kingsly counted twenty-one skeletons. They all died, cap'n; thar's no mistake about thet. If ther colonel told ther truth before he died, Coyote belongs ter ther Bar. Let me see him! Give Cactus Claude a chance at this human puzzle, an' ther dropper will solve it quicker'n lightnin'. Thar's another thing I don't like. Jack whispered suthin' ter Kingsly just before ther colonel war dropped. I saw him."

Burke's face instantly became livid, his eyes flashed.

"That young serpent?" he hissed. "I got onto one of his new schemes to-night. They are goin' ter give us quits, Cactus."

"They?—whom?"

"He an' ther girl."

"One may go, but both shall rot!" cried Cactus. "I don't care much for ther boy, but ther other—Border Berta—I take a good deal of stock in her, cap'n, though she don't like a hair o' my head!"

The boss of Crystal City gave the speaker a look of rage and challenge, and checked himself on the eve of an outburst of anger.

"Neither shall go!" he said. "I run this camp to a certain extent, and no boy steals a march on me."

"Nor a girl on me!" laughed Claude. "They won't go ter-night, cap'n."

"Nor ter-morrow night, nor the next!" was the response. "I will play a hand thet will block all games. I'll show this girl—"

He caught Claude's eye at that moment and stopped.

"Don't go too fast, cap'n," warned the Rolling Stone, coolly. "I want it understood that I will attend to ther girl. I've got more claim on her than anybody thinks for. I'm a bad man from 'way back, when my affairs ar' meddled with."

Burke instinctively drew back, and looked into the speaker's eye.

"I kin wipe out your claim at any time," he said to himself. "I hold a whole deck hyer!"

CHAPTER V.

THE LAST MAN SHOWS HIS HAND.

EVERYBODY in Crystal City forgot the destruction of Keno Bar in the mysterious death of one of its most prominent citizens, Colonel Wonder, or Arizona Al, as he was generally called.

The day after the shooting, the excitement was not in the least abated; everybody was looking for Coyote, and threats against his life were heard everywhere.

The toughs, as a rule, exonerated Christopher Kingsly, or Kit King, as we shall know him. Some were inclined to connect his coming to Crystal City with the death of the faro-dealer, and a sullen few clung to the assertion—which they did not make in public—that he had done the shooting himself.

During the day he kept his quarters at the Mountain Dew or walked about town, as it suited him. More than once he was seen and closely watched by Cactus Claude, who seemed to have seen him before; but where, and under what circumstances?

The Rolling Stone was not the only person

who had singled Kingsly out for espionage. He was watched by Bullion Burke's hunchback pard, who had the keenest pair of eyes in the gold-camp.

The boss of Crystal City had not exaggerated much when he said that this ugly, misshapen creature knew "everybody." Zocco certainly possessed a wonderful knowledge of men, and it would be strange if he did not know something about Kit King.

But it was Coyote who puzzled the tough detectives of Crystal. They hunted all day, but found no clew to the slayer, and at sundown the remains of the colonel were added to the silent little camp on the mountain-side.

Bullion Burke had brought all his shrewdness to bear upon the search he had made. He and the colonel had been friends a long time, and he felt himself under obligations to find and punish his murderer.

Night came and no vengeance. Crystal City saw the mystery as deep as ever.

Burke, alone in his cabin, was in no good humor.

"If Zocco brings no clew when he reports, I will consider it the work of the devil," he growled. "Here is a man shot in the presence of twenty men, and nobody knows who did it! Before he dies he declares that a certain person called Coyote, an old enemy no doubt, did the work, but nobody has found this person. I am puzzled. Some would like to connect this new man, Kingsly, with it, but I can't do that. I don't like to see him here at this particular time. I don't like the eye he carries in his head. I'm of the opinion, like Cactus, that he's here for no good. It's a wonder that Jack and the girl haven't tried to steal away during the excitement. Let 'em try it!" and Bullion's lips closed viciously.

Ten minutes more passed, but Zocco did not come. The camp's boss gave vent to his displeasure in no pleasant language.

At last the door opened, and Burke had a visitor. It was not the dwarf, nor cool-eyed Cactus Claude, but Crystal City's last visitor—Kingsly.

Burke almost started from his stool at the table, but the Last Man from Keno Bar stepped quickly forward and begged him to keep his seat.

"I am here on business," said the desperado's visitor, eying the alcalde closely. "I want you to tell me, Burke, what doomed Keno Bar?"

The words coolly spoken seemed to go to the alcalde's heart like a knife.

Despite Kit King's gaze, he started up.

"Down!" cried the man from Keno Bar, and the next second Burke was looking into the muzzle of a six-shooter that almost touched his face.

"Who are you?" he exclaimed.

"Kit King, Keno Bar's Last Man!" was the reply. "My time has come to act. I am acting now. Sit down, or you may fall with a shattered brain-pan!"

There was no mistaking the words nor the mien of the man that faced him. In an instant Burke was ready to believe that this person was the hunted and wanted Coyote.

He went back to his stool. It was a case of life or death with the boss of Crystal City.

"This is the coolest hand I ever saw played in this camp," he growled. "You can steal a march on one man, Kit King, but I'm not there only one in Crystal."

The lips of the Last Man wore a faint derisive smile before the boast was finished.

"Crystal City will be faced, by and by," he said, over the steady revolver. "I came here to avenge the pards of Keno Bar. The Indian arrow found among the ashes was no clew for me, although it was conviction to Wild Whip, the stage driver. Were you afraid that Keno Bar would eclipse the mountain colony you have established here? What had Keno done to deserve the fate you carried to it a few nights ago—you and your masked pards?"

"Who says I war thar, and who talks about masks?" snapped Burke making an exhibition of defiance that rather amused the avenger.

"The man before you says that," was the retort. "Just out of the camp I alighted from the stage and picked up a mask. Your best pard has just recognized it as yours, Bullion Burke."

"Who did so?"

"Your best pard, I say," smiled Kit King.

"Cactus Claude?"

"No; your Hunchback."

"That cannot be! Zocco cannot be forced to lie on the man to whom he owes his very life."

"Zocco did not lie," returned the Last Man.

"Or if he did, he will never lie again."

"Why not?"

"He is dead."

Burke sprung up with an oath, but the leveled revolver moving up with his sudden action covered his face as before.

"Now, tell me why it was done!" persisted Kit King.

"And how?" said the gold-camp desperado.

"Yes."

"In the first place, we've hated Keno Bar ever since it was established."

"I know that."

"Secondly, it threatened to become a serious rival to Crystal City, and its citizens were men whose crimes had outlawed them elsewhere."

Burke stopped to note the effect of this charge upon the avenger of the burned camp. It added no new flash to his eyes.

He merely said "Go on," and the boss of Crystal bit his lips and obeyed:

"We went down thar fifty strong t'other night ter compromise. We war goin' ter buy Keno Bar if they'd sell, and if they wouldn't—"

"What?"

"We war goin' ter git rid o' ther hull kit! When we got thar we found ther camp asleep for it war late. It warn't all asleep, though; thar war a guard, as if they expected a visit, and that guard fired among us and tumbled Jalisco Joe from his saddle. You kin bet that thar stirred ther blood ov every man in ther band. Thet shot sealed ther doom ov Keno Bar."

"You had no mercy, Bullion Burke. The men of Keno were shot down without it. And not one escaped!"

"Not one unless you—"

"I was not there. You made no calculation on the Last Man, who was away at the time. There were twenty-one skeletons among the ruins. One was Jalisco Joe's, eh?"

"Yes; we threw his body among ther rest."

"After thet you bound yourselves with an oath to say nothing about the destruction of Keno Bar. You were ashamed of your work?"

"Not that," declared Bullion Burke; "but thar war no necessity for spreadin' ther news."

Kit King was silent; the very coolness of the man before him was exasperating in the extreme but he did not break forth into threats of vengeance.

"You can write, Bullion Burke?" he asked at length.

"What if I can?"

"I want the names of the men who rode down to Keno Bar the other night."

"Thar war fifty."

"I don't care if there were two hundred. You know them all. I want their names."

"Whar's yer paper?" snapped the desperado.

Kit King drew a piece of paper from an inside pocket and threw it upon the table before the boss of Crystal.

"Write them all there—all excepting Jalisco Joe and the colonel."

"What! you can't kill forty-eight men?" cried Burke looking up. "They are the best pards in Arizona. Do you play all your games alone?"

"I play them as it suits me the best," was the answer. "Go on and write the names."

Burke was no rapid writer; he had handled the revolver more than the pen, and the task of writing forty-eight names was no easy one for him.

Biting his lips under his dark mustache he went at it, watched by Kit King who took great interest in the work.

Name after name followed one another on the paper before Burke, but the task seemed interminable.

"Thar they ar!" said Bullion Burke when he had finished and the paper was pushed across the rough table. "Ther possession ov them will do you no good."

Kit King folded the paper with one hand and put it back into his pocket.

"If you will follow me you will know that Crystal City discovers my mission in a short time," remarked the Last Man.

"I'm going to post these men."

"You ar," cried Burke. "Whar?"

"In the most conspicuous place in this mountain haunt—at the Mountain Dew. Do you want to see the posting?"

Kit King, for the first time, showed signs of going.

He moved toward the door, but his eyes still rested on the alcalde, and his finger still touched the trigger of his revolver.

"I've seen fools before," said Bullion Burke.

"Fools?" echoed the Last Man. "The chief of fools is the man who led the expedition against Keno Bar."

"See hyer!" laughed Burke. "If you're goin' ter git even for Keno, hyer in Crystal, don't yer

think you'd better take yer men as you find 'em?"

"That is my business," was the answer. "I promise you, Bullion, that before I have played my hand out Crystal City shall know that the twenty-first man of Keno Bar was the worst of the lot. Not one of them was an outlaw, and not one was afraid to go back to where he came from in the broad light of day. The man who accuses the murdered pards of outlawry lies like the Comanche horse-thief!"

"That means me," grated the mad alcalde.

"Wear the boot if it goes on!" was the response. "Keno Bar intended to become no camp's rival. Circumstances threw its inhabitants together. Not one of them ever took the life of a man excepting in self-defense. They were rough in manner, rough in speech, and their death is the saddest crime that stains the annals of the Southwest. I proclaim openly that I am here for vengeance. I shall let all Crystal City know it, and that within the next hour. After that I will hit you where and whenever I can. I may play one hand to-night and another to-morrow, but the outcome of all shall be the same—vengeance! I don't believe in special providences, Bullion, but I believe that justice has made Kit King the avenger of Keno Bar!"

That was all. The last word was falling from the Last Man's lips like the final hiss of a threat as he opened the door and walked out.

There was something startling even in his departure.

Burke stood spellbound in the cabin for several minutes.

"None but a fool will pit himself ag'in' the men who wiped out Keno Bar!" he suddenly exclaimed, and the next moment he, too, was in the starlight.

But Kit King had already disappeared, and, as if he knew where to find him, the alcalde started toward the Mountain Dew Hotel, in his hand a cocked six-shooter.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PROSCRIBED.

"He thinks I do not mean it," said the man who left Bullion Burke astounded in his cabin. "The head demon of this pandemonium shall discover that I mean every word!"

Kit King went straight to the Mountain Dew Hotel. He carried in his pocket the list the alcalde had made out for him. There were forty-eight names in all. Two of the participants in the Keno Bar massacre—Jalisco Joe and Arizona Al—were dead.

The die had been cast, and the Last Man had unmasked himself. He had to go to work, now, and his action meant fight, flight or death.

At one side of the front door of the hotel hung a glass lamp similar to the one that surmounted the entrance to the Tiger's Claws.

Kit King stopped in the light and coolly drew forth the list of the proscribed.

He was watched by the dozen men who happened to be there; they seemed to guess that something unusual was about to take place.

Without addressing them the Last Man placed the paper against the weather-boarding, and suddenly pinned it there with a bowie which he took from beneath his coat.

Those who were near enough noticed that the handle of the bowie showed evidences of having been in a fire; it was more than half burned away.

"There is a list of the men who took part in the Keno Bar massacre," announced Kit King, as he stepped back and pointed at his work, his flashing eye and fine figure revealed to the crowd by the lamp. "I want it distinctly understood that the Last Man of Keno Bar is on the war-path, and that he has an account to settle with each of the forty-eight named in that list."

His hand fell and his eye turned from the crowd. He stepped into the hotel and the men of Crystal City rushed toward the paper.

"Read 'er out!" cried those on the outside. "Let Rattlin' Rock give us ther names."

Rattlin' Rock, a tall, ill-shaped fellow with a skin like parchment, began to read in a nasal voice the list under the lamp.

At the first name the crowd seemed to stare aghast.

"Cactus Claude!" cried the reader, and from the Rolling Stone he passed down the list, naming several who almost touched his elbow.

To a part of the crowd it was a startling surprise. The secret of Keno Bar's doom was out at last, and nobody could justly throw that crime upon the shoulders of the Indian.

Meanwhile, in the office of the hotel stood Kit

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King listening to the list as pronounced by Ratlin' Rock.

"Whar is this man who has a grudge ter fight out?" suddenly cried a voice that was not the reader's.

"I am here," answered Kit, coolly eying the door. "Whose voice was that, Tony?"

Tony Timberlake, the clerk and bartender of the Mountain Dew, touched the Last Man's arm as he replied:

"That man is the worst pill in the box; he is Cactus Claude. He will be in here in less than five seconds."

"I shall be glad to welcome him," smiled Kit King. "Tony, those fellows out there are howling over a list of names which I've just pinned under the lamp. I am here to avenge the massacre of Keno Bar."

"Jehosaphat!" gasped Tony, as he recoiled with a face as white as ashes. "Have you got my name on the list?"

"Were you there?"

"N—no! that is—they almost forced me—"

"Coward! I don't want *you*!" interrupted Kit King. "I suppose you went along for the fun of the thing. The shedding of your blood wouldn't be the avenging of brave men. Go out there and scratch your name from the list. I may have overlooked it."

Tony felt his limbs quake under him; he was midway between a faint and a spasm. He already felt the pistol of the avenger against his temple.

"It was my first night expedition and by heavens, it shall be my last," he groaned. "I kicked against it all along—told Bullion Burke that it was a shame—"

"Shut up! I don't want any lies!" rebuked Kit King, and the terrified youth became as mute as a clam. "Where is this Bashan bull that was roaring out there a minute ago?"

If Cactus Claude was outside he was strangely mute, and the cool man who stood near the bar waiting calmly for the bursting of the mountain cloud seemed puzzled by the singular silence.

"There's somebody at the back door," said Tony, at length.

Kit King turned half-around.

"Go and open it," he said, to the clerk.

"I'm not insured," was the reply, accompanied by a slight shrinking and a sickly smile.

The Last Man gave him a derisive glance and stepped to the door himself.

"Come in," he called out, as he pushed back a small iron bolt and opened the door.

Instead of a stalwart man backed by a score of mountain toughs, as was to be expected, the figure of a young girl was seen.

"Border Berta!" exclaimed Tony. "See here, girl; this is no place—"

But the girl was already inside, and with her hand on the avenger's arm she was looking up into his face.

"You don't know what a storm you have raised," she said. "They are gathering for a rush that will overwhelm you. You may be the bravest man that ever lived, but it will not be bravery for you to face the tigers of Crystal City. They call you Coyote, the man who killed the colonel, and they will get you if they lose two-thirds of their numbers."

The girl spoke rapidly and in a voice full of deep solicitude for the man before her.

"So you think I had better go?" Kit King said, as he looked with a smile into the face whose pleading it would be hard to resist.

"For Heaven's sake, yes!" cried the girl.

"I now know what brought you to Crystal, and I can't say that I blame you; but you can get no vengeance out of the storm you have raised. I left them at the Tiger's Claws. Jack is watching them yet, but he can do nothing to help you. Go—go! let your blow fall some other time, when the odds are not so great against you. Jack already thinks the world of you, and I—I do not want you to perish here."

Kit looked from the girl to the clerk, who had gone to the door, where he was listening, with his face still white.

"Are they coming, Tony?" asked the girl.

"I don't hear them."

"It cannot be long," she went on, addressing the Last Man. "Jack found a dead body in camp half an hour ago. It was Zocco, Bullion Burke's hunchback pard. They may accuse you of killing him."

"I did," confessed Kit King. "The little spider was at my throat before I knew it, and I struck him for a panther. When I discovered he was human, and Zocco, I got from him some information about the doom of Keno Bar. He was there."

"They were all there, I think. I saw them

ride out of camp that night, but I never dreamed that they were bent on an expedition of that kind. But you are going, ain't you?"

"Going to run?"

"It will be brave to withdraw in the face of such odds," replied Berta, quickly. "How is it now, Tony?"

"The door of the Tiger's Claws has been opened."

"They are coming!" cried the girl, grasping Kit's arm again. "It will be the one bright spot in my life history if I can get you from the clutches of that crowd."

"Then you shall have it," was the reply.

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed the girl.

The next moment Tony Timberlake was the sole occupant of the room, and he was not disposed to remain and face the crowd, at that very moment advancing upon the hotel.

"I don't want to give the girl away, and I will have to if I stay," he said. "I don't think they'd deal leniently with her, even if she is the prettiest creature in Arizona. The present best place for Tony Timberlake is where the two captains can't quiz him at the pistol's muzzle."

Kit King did not move along as rapidly as the girl wished.

All the time he was listening with head erect for the first sounds of the storm. More than once he seemed about to stop and go back, but a glance at the fair young creature who had jeopardized her life for him, deterred him.

"This is not cowardice," said Berta as if she read his thoughts at that critical moment. "I will hate the man who dares to impugn your bravery. The men who went to Keno Bar are the king toughs of Arizona. Coyote may be among them, for aught I know, for the man who killed Colonel Wonder must have been in the room."

At that moment a noise came from the hotel. It sounded like the fall of some heavy piece of timber, and then came the wild cries of a number of men.

"They've found the fort empty," said the girl with a laugh.

Kit King stopped and with one hand on the butt of a six-shooter, drew back. Even in the starlight the young girl caught the mad gleam in his eyes.

"Not now!" she cried. "You promised to leave them to themselves. Don't break your pledge to me."

"By Jove! I will not!" he exclaimed. "Come, girl. These fellows will hear from Kit King again and they shall curse the night they rode to Keno Bar."

"He is safe!" said Berta in tones of gratefulness when she found herself, twenty minutes later, in the darkness that filled the interior of her little cabin. "Tony will not expose me, and nobody saw me come to him and warn him of his danger. What draws me to that man?—his coolness, his bravery? I do not know. I care not if he does come back. He is not the man to remain away. But to-night the odds were too great against him. I could not see him shot to pieces by the men who wiped out his comrades at Keno Bar."

The girl spoke aloud in the gloom that hemmed her in.

When she finished a human figure glided from the logs of the cabin, and disappeared.

"So help me, heaven, if I ever give that girl away," the listener said. "I don't think I need have many hopes of capturin' her as the situation stands. One thing still remains a mystery. They don't know who Coyote is," and the speaker laughed. Just beyond the confines of the gold-camp stood a handsome man whose face was turned toward the cabins.

His figure was straight and faultless, and the wind that shook the pine boughs about him stirred the long dark hair that fell gracefully to his broad and strong shoulders.

"For once in many years I have listened to the voice of woman," he suddenly said. "Great Caesar! who could have refused that girl anything to-night? She does not belong to the tiger den of which she is an occupant. As well expect a flower to bloom in hades. If I had not this mission on my hands, I would get her another home; but, vengeance first! I did not think the list was so long. If it took in the whole camp I would not turn back. Kit King has enlisted for the war!"

It was the Last Man himself.

CHAPTER VII.

TWO NIGHTS AFTER.

TONY TIMBERLAKE, more than half in love with the girl himself, did not see fit to mention that she had coaxed Kit King into flight when

questioned by Bullion Burke at the head of the disappointed toughs.

The sole man who suspected her was the person who glided away from the outside of her cabin after the flight.

There was still a divided opinion among the pards of Crystal City. By a large number it was believed that Kit King and the mysterious Coyote were the same person, but many adhered to the argument that they were totally different people.

If the latter inference was correct, then Coyote still remained in the camp.

The list of the proscribed in Burke's handwriting was left where the Last Man had pinned it with the bowie with the burned hilt.

The alcalde declared that it should remain there until the game inaugurated by the man from Keno Bar had been played out.

Zocco was dead, and the citizens of Crystal City wondered whether Burke would reveal the true relationship that had existed between them for years.

Not a word passed the alcalde's lips, and the camp was disappointed.

The body of the hunchback was carried by night to the mountain and buried by the only man who knew anything about his past life.

One thing was certain. Zocco would no longer serve as the alcalde's spy; he would listen at no more cabin doors as he had done, for secrets; the knife of Kit King, silent and sure, had terminated a career that had not one redeeming feature.

Those who saw the alcalde come back from the burial saw a settled expression of determination on his face, and they knew that a strong tie of some kind had united him to the dwarf.

As the Last Man had declared that Keno Bar owed its destruction to fifty desperadoes from Crystal City, nobody thought it worth while to keep the secret longer.

They justified the massacre on the ground that the Bar was a dangerous place, and that its people were men whose crimes had driven them from a dozen States and Territories. It was curious to hear these mountain toughs talk of hunting men down for alleged crimes when they themselves deserved the halter and a stout limb.

It was near midnight two nights after the flight of Kit King, that a man about to enter the Mountain Dew Hotel looked at the names under the lamp that hung outside.

"Hello! somebody has scratched Bowie Bland's name out!" he exclaimed. "Hey thar! Tony, is this some ov yer work?"

Mr. Timberlake, who was within hearing distance, came forward and denied that the erasure of the name was his work, and the next moment half a dozen men were before the list.

"It's been done lately," said one. "Thet name wer' unsratched two hours ago, for I saw it. Mebbe he did it himself."

"Bowie?"

"No, ther other one."

"What! ther man from Keno Bar?" exclaimed several voices.

The man nodded.

"The killer has come back," said a deep voice at that juncture, and the crowd turned to see the stalwart figure of Cactus Claude.

"I mean what I say," continued the Rolling Stone. "Go down ter Bowie Bland's shanty and look at its inmate."

The crowd started off with many curses, and with their hands on half-drawn weapons.

Cactus Claude walked into the hotel and called for his favorite drink.

"Tony," he said over the bar as he fixed his eyes on the young clerk. "Tony, I think the time has come for your play."

The clerk started.

"You will find the horses, Jupiter an' Pluto, in the stalls. You know the road ter Tucson?"

"Yes, but—"

"Now or never!" interrupted Claude. "Jack is gettin' a hold on ther girl that can't be shaken off after a few days. Once out o' camp, thar will be no huntin'. I will stand between you an' those left behind."

"Between me and Bullion Burke?" asked the clerk.

"Between you an' ther alcalde," was the reply. "Ther girl is at this moment in her shanty, Jack is in his, Bullion Burke is at ther 'Tiger's Claws,' an' in less than ten minutes ther rest ov Crystal City will be at Bowie Bland's cabin. Now is yer time. I submit ter this. I told you that one day you should be ther husband of this girl, who is worth more than her weight in gold, as can be proven, an' thet time has come."

"But she doesn't take very well to me,"

laughed Tony. "I've tried to get on with her, but the presence of Jack, whom she really likes, always made it up-hill work."

"Up-hill fol-de-rol!" flashed Cactus, bringing his bronze hand down upon the counter. "Go an' get ther hosses out. Lead 'em down ter ther twin rocks. I'll play more than half o' ther hand for you. Mebbe you want an escort ter Tucson."

"Not that," stammered the amazed clerk. "If I had the girl safely out of camp, I would have no fears for the balance of the game."

"You shall have her thar! As a mountain matchmaker, Cactus Claude has no equal." And the Rolling Stone laughed. "Leave ther house just as it is. Go ter ther hosses. This night gets you ther daisiest wife in Arizona, if you show sense in playin' ther hand I give you. Now be off!"

Before he left the hotel Tony Timberlake armed himself with two revolvers, and when he went out Cactus Claude was helping himself to the stiffest whisky the bar afforded.

"In helpin' Tony I'm openin' a bonanza for myself, an' I'm gettin' even with Bullion Burke. Crystal City is fast becomin' too small for two men ov our caliber. I've been called his lieutenant long enough. Don't I know that his dwarf brother dogged my steps whenever I went near the girl? The man called Kit King finished Zocco before I got a chance; he'll have to work fast if he plays his hand ag'in' Bullion Burke before we come together. He may have an inkling about Berta's identity, but I doubt it. I think I am the only man in camp that knows."

He passed out of the building and listened for a moment in the starlight beyond.

A minute later he was walking rapidly away. Meantime, the crowd that had rushed pell-mell to Bowie Bland's cabin, had found a large, fine-looking man dead under a rough, deal table.

All knew at a glance that it was Bowie Bland himself.

"This is ther Last Man's work," said one, and all the others, grouped in the lamplight, echoed the sentiment.

There was confirmation at hand, for written across the top of the table with chalk were the words:

"This is for Keno Bar!"

The men drew back as if the slayer stood in the shadow of the open door. If this silent killer was to come to Crystal City night after night and take his man, who would be safe?

There was something horrible in the thought; it was enough to make the best man at the mines start at a shadow.

Bowie Bland was left where he was found; the toughs of Crystal drew silently over the threshold.

"To ther Tiger," said some one. "Bullion Burke is thar."

This was enough to start the crowd toward the faro bank, but thirty yards away the foremost man drew back from an object upon which he had almost stepped.

"Jehul another man!" cried the leader of the crowd.

Stretched on the ground in the starlight with arms extended and eyes staring at the glittering worlds overhead lay a man who was dead and cold.

In his breast stuck a bowie with a dark iron hilt, and told in silent language the story of another desperado's doom.

This was too much.

The crowd looked at the spectacle for a moment, and then made a rush for the faro den.

Bursting into the place, their faces and oaths told the players that some terrible event had taken place.

Bullion Burke looked up and saw the excited and, to some extent fear-stricken crowd.

In a moment all had been told.

With a cry of rage and vengeance, the alcalde of Crystal City left his chips and came forward with blazing eyes.

"This has to stop!" he cried. "We can't sit hyer and let this madman do work of this kind under our very hands. By ther eternal heavens! we'll set a trap for ther fool from Keno an' play ther game out before he has begun it."

There were voices of approval, but all did not speak.

In the crowd were men who already had decided to leave the camp. They were not going to remain behind for this silent slayer; there were a thousand hiding-places in the wild Southwest, and trails which the eyes of the keenest blood-hunter could not find.

When the list under the hotel lamp was again scanned it was discovered that the name of the second man found dead had been erased.

The inspectors drew back.

The erasion had taken place since the discovery of Bowie Bland's body.

Was Kit King still in the camp?

Bullion Burke had deserted the excited crowd and gone to his cabin. In the light of the little lamp on the bracket above his table the bronzed alcalde had inspected a pair of handsome revolvers, and a deadly-looking bowie.

He was at this duty when the door opened and a man came in. In person this man was like Bullion Burke and he came forward without license or invitation.

"Did ther girl give yer ther slip, cap'n?" he asked with a grin which only darkened the alcalde's face and made him start forward.

"Is she gone?" he exclaimed.

"Thar's nobody in ther shanty. Ther velvet kid went toward sartin stables a while ago an' took two horses out."

"Is this true, Full Deck?" cried Burke.

"Would I be retailin' it hyer if it warn't?"

The alcalde's answer was a tremendous oath of madness.

"I won't be for long," he said. "I knew the two war aimin' ter give us the slip, but I didn't think they'd go to-right."

"When did he get ther girl's affections?" asked the visiting tough, astonished. "We fetched that young cocktail-mixer hyer for business an' not ter run off with a girl."

"What do you mean?" ejaculated Bullion Burke. "Ain't you talkin' about Jack?"

"Not by a thousand miles! I'm mentionin' ther cocktail dude of ther Mountain Dew. He's ther man what took ther two animiles away."

Bullion Burke was a picture of amazement. He did not know whether to laugh or to swear.

Finally he did the former, but it was the laugh of a man who had vengeance at his heart.

"So Tony Timberlake plays for the girl?" he exclaimed. "He cannot be helpin' Jack for they have long been enemies. Somebody big is at the bottom of this. The hotel clerk is not shrewd enough to get through the game by himself. I think I know who is his master."

"So do I," laughed the man.

"For a long time Crystal City has been growin' too small for us," Bullion Burke. "I am goin' to tell this man so to-night—now!"

"Hadn't yer better put it off till yer cool down, cap'n?"

"No. I'm cool now."

Bullion Burke rushed from his cabin like a whirlwind.

"I'll see ther affair," laughed the man as he followed.

He found it somewhat difficult to keep the alcalde in sight, but he was near enough to see him cross the threshold of the Mountain Dew.

A man at the bar was in the act of lifting a glass to his lips. Before he was aware of Bullion Burke's presence, his hand fell upon his arm. At the touch he whirled.

"We'll settle the mastery of Crystal City hyer and now!" grated the alcalde.

"Wait till I've drank," was the cool reply.

CHAPTER VIII.

A THREE-HANDED AFFAIR.

THE two men who stood face to face in the bar-room of the Mountain Dew Hotel, had for a long time been secret rivals for the mastery of Crystal City.

The few citizens who saw the meeting felt that the rivalry was to be fought out, for nobody believed that Bullion Burke and Cactus Claude could quarrel openly without a fight.

The Rolling Stone quietly downed his liquor, as if the alcalde was at that moment ten miles away, and having set the empty glass on the counter just as coolly, he said to Bullion Burke with a smile at his lips:

"What war it you war sayin'? 'Pears ter me I heard you remark suthin' about settlin' ther mastery ov some place ter-night."

"Thet is what I said," was the reply that came from between set teeth. "This place is too small for giants like us, Cactus Claude. Ther young man who took yer hosses away, took 'em with yer consent an' instructions, eh?"

The Rolling Stone knew in a second that a part of his game had been discovered. Tony had been seen to take his best horses from the stable.

"I never let my horses go away unbeknowns," he said, giving Bullion Burke look for look. "If it'll do you any good ter know, Bullion, they went off ter-night with their owner's full consent."

Bullion Burke stepped back.

That was enough.

"Oh, if you want ther mastery business settled, I'm yer huckleberry," grated Cactus Claude, following him up. "For three years, an' they've been years ov torture ter me, Crystal City has been too small for two men like us. Whar shall it be?—hyer, Bullion?"

The sallow hand of the Rolling Stone rested on the butt of a revolver at his hip, and his restless eye as it measured Bullion Burke, told how eager he was to make another bloody event in Crystal City's history.

"Not hyer," said the alcalde. "Outside."

"Outside, then."

By this time more than one-half of the population of the gold-camp seemed to swarm in the street before the hotel. The news that there was to be a meeting between the two rivals had spread like wildfire. If they met, all knew the meeting would be a deadly one.

Bullion Burke was the first to reach the street, but Cactus Claude was at his heels.

The crowd drew back.

The light of the lamp, that hung against the rough weather-boarding of the hotel, showed a little space in front of the building. It was barely more than thirty feet square, but it was wide enough to fight in, especially as the men to fight would not contest at long range.

Burke turned to the crowd, and threw up one hand to enforce silence.

"Gentlemen, thar's ter be an affair ov honor between me an' Cactus, hyer," he said. "Thar's a matter thet kin be settled only in this way, an' we've concluded ter settle it—how, Cactus Claude?"

"I'm not particular," said the Rolling Stone, with assumed carelessness. "I'm willin' ter let two ov ther crowd toss for weapons an' distance. Heads for revolvers an' ten steps; tails for bowies an' hand ter hand."

Bullion Burke took an "eagle" from his pocket, and tossed it toward a large man who stood in front of the crowd.

"Dakota Dave an' Rio Rolfe kin toss," he said. "It is fairly understood: heads, revolvers; tails, ther blade!"

The big man, who had picked up the coin, was joined by a man who looked like a dwarf beside him, and the two walked nearer the lamp while Dakota Dave balanced the piece on the tip of a bronzed finger.

The two principals seemed to look indifferently on, but at the same time they were eying one another as if each were fearful that the other would seek a sudden and deadly advantage.

"Hyer we go!" suddenly exclaimed Dakota Dave, and the gold-piece spun toward the stars to fall back on the ground in a moment.

The two judges bent eagerly forward; some of the crowd did the same.

"Heads!" said Rio Rolfe.

"Best two in three," replied Dakota Dave, and the go'd-piece went upward once more.

"Heads again!" said the same voice, a moment later.

"Revolvers at ten paces," said Bullion Burke, glancing at the Rolling Stone, who seemed to increase an inch in stature and looked pleased.

Crystal City knew that the toss had been decided in favor of the deadliest pistol in the camp, if not in all Arizona.

A quick hand and a sure aim had marked Cactus Claude's entire life; he was known as a dead shot before he ever cast his fortunes with the roughs of Crystal, and six men out of the unfortunate twenty of Keno Bar had gone to their last reward by his trigger.

This is the man Bullion Burke had forced into a duel, and he had to take the consequences as they were about to come.

Dakota Dave handed the eagle back to its owner and proceeded to step off the fighting-ground.

It was almost under the lamp, with the list of the proscribed with two erasions between the rivals and enemies.

Meantime, neither of the men had drawn a weapon; there was time enough for that. In the crowd there were several revolvers drawn, and the men who held them were watching Cactus Claude to catch the first move indicative of foul play.

The Rolling Stone walked coolly to the end of the space and swung his body around till he faced the alcalde.

"Hadn't yer better draw, gentlemen?" said Dakota Dave.

"Mebbe we had," smiled Cactus Claude, and the crowd saw the much-feared six-shooter glide from his belt as if it moved at the touch of his practiced hand.

"What's this fight about?" muttered some one near the Rolling Stone.

"Ask that man. He started these proceedin's," said Claude.

The crowd turned instinctively to Bullion Burke.

"Thar's a good deal behind it all," said the alcalde. "He ar' goin' to fight for the alcaideship of Crystal City. You will say thet thet b'longs ter me now, but I'm not altogether alcalde till I've settled with Cactus Claude. Thar ar' minor things connected with this duel thet consarns us alone, an' not Crystal in general."

"Personal, gentlemen, personal," smiled Cactus Claude.

"Things thet should have been settled long ago," continued the alcalde, taking no notice of the Rolling Stone's explanation.

"I war at his service all ther time," said Claude. He needn't hev set his man-dog, Zocco, at my heels. He had but ter lay his hand on my shoulder an' say 'Cactus, I want ter fight you,' thet would have been enough."

"I say it now!" cried Bullion Burke, making a move as if he was eager to lift the revolver he clutched. "I call a truce ter all this. Let it be 'fight,' an' may St. Peter open his gate to ther poorest shot!"

After that there could be nothing but a duel to the death. The two men were placed back to back with thirty feet of ground between them.

They stood erect in the light of the lamp, the revolver at their sides and their fingers at the trigger.

The crowd, breathless now, drew a little further back, as if by common consent. Dakota Dave was ready to pronounce the signal.

"Let's make it three-handed," suddenly rung out a voice, and the whole crowd looked up to see a man on horseback at the edge of the light spot.

He leaned forward like an eager person, and not a few saw that he clutched a revolver in his right hand.

"Kit King!" exclaimed Cactus Claude, half-raising his weapon.

"I am Kit King the Last Man of Keno Bar!" was the answer. "You heard what I said, gentlemen. Let us make this fight a three-handed affair. When Dakota Dave delivers his signal we proceed to business, each man shooting where he pleases."

It was a wild proposition, and one never heard before where it was spoken.

The crowd stared aghast at the cool speaker. Why had they not seen him before? Had he been there all the time? Perhaps he had just come up; but no! the dead bodies of two men then in camp told that he had not been far off.

"This is our duel," said Bullion Burke. "After the signal, Crystal City, headed by the survivor, will attend ter Keno Bar's last galoot. Sit thar an' take it in if you want ter; but woe ter ther man whose bowie shed blood since sundown!"

Having said this, the alcalde resumed the position from which the voice of Kit King had startled him.

The next moment Dakota Dave began to count, for it was understood that after the third numeral the two sports were to wheel and fire when they wished.

The counter took a breath between the numbers.

"Three!" he said, sharply, and with emphasis.

Only one half of the crowd was looking at the two duelists; the other half was eying the man on horseback.

At the word, Bullion Burke and Cactus Claude wheeled at the same moment and at the same time, to the astonishment of all, the black horse that carried the Last Man dashed between!

It was like a flash!

Two hands rose simultaneously, one on each side of the saddle, and two revolvers flashed at the same second.

A loud cry rose from the crowd as two men fell back, one reeling away with uplifted hands, the other staggering with hands down.

The startled toughs saw a horse dash on; in an instant, as it were, the animal and his rider had passed beyond the light, and were targets no longer.

For all that, twenty men sprung forward and fired down the cabin-fringed street, and as many more rushed to the two men who had staggered from the red flashes.

"It was a three-handed duel, after all," said one, turning away with a glance at the victims.

"An' ther Last Man got 'em both," was the reply.

CHAPTER IX.

THE TUCSON TRAIL.

AMONG the spectators of this startling affray was a youth who had been held spellbound, as it were, for some minutes.

This person was Jack, Border Berta's accepted lover.

Totally unaware of certain events which had lately taken place at the girl's cabin, he had witnessed the triangular duel, and the escape of the man who had fired at two men at once.

He did not push forward with the crowd to look at the two stalwart victims, but left the spot, and a minute later knocked at the door of Berta's cabin.

There was no invitation to enter, but Jack did not hesitate on that account; he raised the latch and walked in.

For once the girl did not come forward to greet him, and his first sentence was broken by sudden silence on his part.

The cabin was empty.

If he had been a little earlier he would have witnessed a scene in which he would have interfered.

A short time prior to the duel the girl saw her door open, and the next moment she stood face to face with the one man she dreaded, Cactus Claude.

The Rolling Stone had a gleam of victory in his eyes, and his voice was unusually mellow when he came forward, stared at by the beauty of Crystal City, who wondered what he could want.

"They tell me you've been thinkin' ov leavin' Crystal," said the tough. "As I've got my news straight, I've made arrangements for you ter go to-night."

The girl started, and a light cry escaped her lips.

"But I don't want to go," she said.

"Mebbe not," laughed the Rolling Stone; "but that makes no difference. I'm hyer ter say that everything is in readiness, hosses saddled an' all, an' that you're goin' now."

"With whom?—with you?" ejaculated the girl drawing back to the very wall of the cabin.

"Not with Cactus, but with a younger an' a handsomer man," was the reply.

"Then, with—"

Berta checked herself. "No, not with Jack!" she thought. "This man doesn't like Jack, and he is not going to send me away under his escort. He is playing another game. Heaven help me if I fall completely into his hands! I shudder when I see him. Something makes me hate him."

"I guess you're not goin' with ther fellow ye'r thinkin' about," smiled Cactus Claude. "You'll see yer escort presently, an' he will get yer ter Tucson if anybody kin."

"To Tucson? Why should I go to Tucson?" cried Berta. "I know nobody there."

"I've said ter Tucson, an' ter Tucson it is!" was the reply and the Rolling Stone spoke through clinched teeth. "Ther hosses ar' waitin', girl, an' ther escort is rather eager ter see his companion over ther trail."

"I don't want to go. I—"

"I'm hyer ter take you ter th r saddle!" was the interruption and the tough bounded forward and his hand closed on the girl's arm. "I want ter say hyer, Berta, that I'm a bad man when I'm riled. We don't want you hyer. Crystal City is goin' ter be a battleground ov some kind within forty-eight hours. You've got ter go ter Tucson, with a man who thinks as much ov you as Jack does."

Let us not prolong this scene. The hand that tightened at the girl's arm told her thet she was helpless in the clutches of Cactus Claude, but, for all that, she drew back and gave him look for look.

"Tell me one thing," she said. "What do you know about my early life?"

"Who told you thet I know anything?" was the reply.

"I know you do."

The Rolling Stone laughed in a manner that only increased the girl's curiosity.

"I don't give secrets away, my Arizona gold-bird," he said at the end of the laugh. "If you live long enough, and don't try ter interfere with my little game, you'll know what I know. What do you think I know, eh?"

"I am a waif. All Crystal City knows that," said Berta. "My earliest recollections have been of wild camps and wild men, but sometimes I think that I have seen the houses of a great city where there are thousands of people, but that may all have been a dream."

"I guess it was," was the answer, but the girl saw that she had held the tough breathless while she was speaking. "You'll see

some pretty fair houses an' a good many people when you get ter Tucson. Mebbe it war Tucson you war dreamin' about."

Border Berta made no reply, and a minute later she was hurrying through Crystal City with the fallow hand of the gold tough at her wrist and his eyes upon her.

It was not far to the spot where a certain young man waited with two horses.

"Hyar we ar'," said the Rolling Stone as he halted before the steeds. "Hyar is yer companion ter Tucson, Tony."

The young girl started at the name, and fixed her gaze on the person who stepped forward to greet her.

It was Tony Timberlake, the clerk and bartender of the Mountain Dew Hotel, and he gallantly lifted his hat to Berta, as he observed, with a glance at Cactus:

"I guess we'll get through without accident. I shall do my part as well as I can. It is not a very long ride."

There was no reply.

The girl wondered if this man was really in any scheme with Cactus Claude.

She knew that he had tried to ingratiate himself into her favor, but without success. He had been forestalled by Jack, who had carried off the prize he wanted to win.

"I will test this fellow before we are far from Crystal City," said Berta to herself. "If he is wholly Cactus Claude's tool, I will serve him an unpleasant trick."

Berta did not object when she was led to one of the horses and assisted to his back.

"She goes like a lamb," observed Claude, somewhat astonished at her submission. "After all, she may be in favor of Tony more than Jack."

"You know yer instructions," he said in low tones to the young clerk who was about to get into his saddle. "Thar's no danger 'twixt hyer an' Tucson. You will go straight ter Major Belt an' tell him that I say that this girl must be Mrs. Timberlake within three hours. You understand, eh?"

Tony nodded and was in the saddle.

"Good-by," said Cactus Claude to the girl. "Day after to-morrow you'll be in better spirits than you are now."

A minute after the two horses had started forward and the Rolling Stone was watching their vanishing shapes ere he put back to the camp where he was to encounter his rival and the man from Keno Bar.

It is now known why Jack found nobody in the girl's cabin when he called.

No suspicion of the event we have just recorded seems to have entered his mind!

"She may be near the scene of the duel," he said. "If she is it will not be long till her return."

Jack resolved to wait for the girl at that moment riding toward Tucson with Tony Timberlake who had left his desk and bar forever.

If Jack had known this, another horse would have been saddled in a minute, and a young man with flashing eyes would have urged him over the trail toward Tucson.

But Jack did not know anything about the game Cactus Claude had played, and, innocent like, he waited in Berta's cabin for the beautiful girl who did not come.

As for the girl, she did not speak to her escort until they were fairly on the trail with Crystal City some distance in their rear.

"You will now tell me what this means, won't you?" she asked looking at the young man.

"This is Cactus Claude's work, and you are doing his bidding. What does it all mean?"

Tony collected his thoughts before he made any reply. He had never had any experience before in this kind of work, but he was no fool, and more than one shrewd game he had played before he ever saw Crystal City.

To tell Berta the truth now would be to defeat the whole scheme. He did not know what Cactus Claude's motives were, but he knew that, if he told the truth, he would lose a very desirable wife.

Tony was in a dilemma.

"You heard me speak," said the impatient girl leaning slightly toward Tony and adding a sternness to her words. "I stop here till I know what this sudden journey means."

She reined in her steed as she finished and showed Tony a countenance full of resolution.

"I am to conduct you to Tucson," said the clerk.

"For Cactus Claude?"

"Yes."

"What has he in view?"

"Nothing against you. I assure you that."

"But he is playing a game of some kind."

"Not that I know of."

Tony had resolved to bring deliberate falsehood to his rescue. He knew from the Rolling Stone's character that he did nothing of this sort without a deep-laid motive.

"Is it true that you enlist in the service of Cactus Claude, a man of plots, and agree to take a young girl to Tucson after night without believing that he is playing a game of some kind—a game against the person he is so anxious to land in the Arizona town?" said Berta. "When did you become so verdant, Tony Timberlake?"

"If I thought it was a scheme looking to your harm, hang me if I would move a step," he exclaimed. "I'd rot in Crystal at my desk before I'd lend a hand against a girl as beautiful as you."

"No flattery. I understand that," said Berta, smiling. "What puzzles me is your innocence. I believe I'll go back."

Quick as a flash Tony's hand darted forward and seized the bridle-rein of the girl's horse.

"I cannot let you return," he said. "I have engaged to take you to Tucson."

"In other words, you want me to go there. Where do we stop in the city?"

"At the house of a gentleman."

"Of the Cactus Claude order? What is his name?"

"Major Max Belt."

Tony did not see the girl start at his reply; he did not notice the new, almost eager light that came to her eyes.

"Does Cactus Claude send me to this Major Belt?" she asked.

"Yes."

"When did he come to Tucson?"

"I don't know."

"Did you ever see him?"

"No."

"You will find me a companion to our journey's end," said Border Berta. "I am almost as anxious to see this Major Belt as Cactus Claude is that I should see him."

Tony gave the girl a look that showed his wonder and surprise.

"In Satan's name why does she want to see Major Belt?" he muttered. "Maybe Cactus have played the wrong hand for once."

CHAPTER X.

A QUESTION OF BEAUTY.

WHILE Tony Timberlake was conducting a now willing girl over the trail toward Tucson, Crystal City was all excitement over the singular ending of the desperadoes' duel in front of the Mountain Dew Hotel.

Those who professed to be accurate said that Kit King had fired from each side of his horse at once, and that Cactus Claude and Bullion Burke the duelist had reeled away at the same time.

It is likely that the sudden shooting had failed to deprive the wild Southwest of two of its most desperate characters, for in two cabins in Crystal City half an hour after the three-cornered fight, two men nursed pretty severe wounds, which did not, however, threaten their lives.

Cactus Claude had received a bullet under the shoulder-blade, and the alcalde of the gold-camp had had the side of his face plowed by a dangerous leaden pellet.

It was a narrow escape for both men, by the breadth of a hair as it were, and when they wanted to finish the duel, their friends hustled them off to their shanties and set a guard over them.

"Mebbe they won't be so anxious ter fight when they cool down," said Dakota Dave to a crowd. "We can't afford ter have differences hyer with a man like Kit King drawin' death-marks across a list ov our best citizens. Bullion an' Cactus must postpone their fight till we've settled with Keno Bar's last galoot."

That became the opinion of the majority of Crystal City before that eventful night wore away.

The avenger of Keno Bar was gone. He had ridden off with the belief, no doubt, that he had taken the lives of the two foremost men of the camp, that he had shot them dead on their own dueling ground.

Bullion Burke reclined on a pallet in his cabin with his face patched up by the camp's surgeon.

One thing was certain, the healing wound would leave a scar that would spoil his wild beauty, and this fact made him grate his teeth whenever the thought came up.

"If he had ter mark us, why didn't he serve us both alike?" growled the alcalde to the attendant who sat near the table. "Don't yer see, Rattler, he left Cactus his face, but me—by Jupiter! he had ter spoil mine! When I get

well, I'm goin' ter break or banish every lookin'-glass in Crystal. Hereafter, whenever I see one, I'm going to shut my eyes an' shoot it ter pieces."

In this way the wounded alcalde, who was perhaps the vainest man in the camp, rattled on with curses and epithets until he almost exhausted his vocabulary of disappointment and abuse.

Rattler Rock, who was his attendant, was anxious to get away, and then the alcalde turned over and seemed to fall asleep; he thought the opportunity had come.

For several moments Rattler continued to watch the sleeper; then he got up.

"He run out o' language at last," he remarked. "If Kit King had dropped in, Bullion would hev chewed 'im up blood raw."

The man glided from the shanty, and left the wounded tough alone.

"I've got rid o' him," exclaimed the alcalde, as he sprung up and went to the door. "It war a neat trick, an' I'll make it a profitable one before day. I sha'n't be uglier than Cactus Claude. If I am marked for life, he shall be. The man from Keno Bar saw fit ter make fish ov one an' fowl o' ther other. By ther infernals! we shall both be fish or fowl. No half-way business hyer!"

Bullion Burke's appearance was not prepossessing, bandaged and plastered as he was. The pain of the wound was nothing; it was gall to think of his rival Cactus Claude with a face unscarred.

"Mebbe I'll shoot too nigh ther center," he said, arming himself with a revolver which he took from a belt hanging under his lamp. "If I do, nobody in partic'lar will kick. Ov course I'd like ter know what he knows about ther girl's early life, but I kin get at thet by a little detective work in ther East whar she came from."

It was almost midnight when Bullion Burke opened his cabin door and stepped out into the starlight.

If nothing had happened Tony Timberlake and the waif of the camp were well on their trail to Tucson. It would take a swift horse to overhaul them now.

Bullion Burke walked away keeping in the shadow of the shanties. He had the stealthy tread of the panther, for he made no noise as he moved along.

Not far away stood the cabin occupied by Cactus Claude.

The Rolling Stone lay on a rude pallet enduring with calmness the wound inflicted by the man who had marked the alcalde for life.

Cactus Claude was alone, and as he lay at full length on the pallet, the lamp-light fell upon his hard face and deep black eyes.

His thoughts were not on the man who at that moment was creeping upon him through the starlight.

"Ther major will carry out my instructions to ther letter when Tony lands ther girl in Tucson," he muttered, showing where his thoughts really were. "I haven't seen him for seven years, but that makes no difference. He will see thet she becomes Mrs. Timberlake, an' I'll have a report ov ther hull affair within three days. If I thought this shot war goin' ter wipe me out by some unfair means, I'd send one o' ther boys post haste ter Tucson with other instructions; but pshaw! it's goin' ter do nothin' ov ther kind. I've passed through worse sieges than this. I can't afford ter pass off an' leave my little game half-played. I can't afford it, I say, an' I don't intend ter!"

The night was midsummer, and the men who had just left Cactus Claude had not closed the cabin door. By looking out, the Rolling Stone could see the stars that studded the sky like the brilliant gems of a diamond field.

Suddenly a figure glided between him and the stars; in a moment it came back, and then seemed to approach the door.

Cactus Claude heard the noise of no footstep, but the figure kept persistently between him and the gold field of the heavens. He knew it was at the door.

Bullion Burke was the last man the Rolling Stone thought of at that moment. A few minutes before Cactus had thought of him lying in his own cabin shot in the face and with no beauty left but that which lay in his faultless form and long black hair.

There was nothing blamably selfish about Cactus Claude. Desperado as he was, he regretted that his enemy and rival had been thus badly marked for life, and if he could have turned the bullet, gladly would he have done so.

"That's a man out thar," said the Rolling Stone to himself, as he gazed at the dark figure

at the door. "It may be one of ther boys back from ther Tiger. Why don't he come in?"

At that moment the door was opened a little more, and the person on the pallet saw the figure of a man.

There was a stealth about the movement that put Cactus Claude on his guard.

Instinctively his hand moved to one side of the cot, but before it could find the revolver a friend had placed there, a man came into the cabin with a rush and landed where the gold tough was.

"Thought I'd leave yer hyer laughin' over my spiled looks, eh?" grated the visitor. "May I be hanged, Cactus, if it shall be shoulder an' face!"

One hand of the speaker had fallen with sudden force upon the wounded sport's breast, and the other was pressing against his cheek the muzzle of a cocked six-shooter.

The plastered cheek was enough to tell Cactus Claude that Bullion Burke was before him. The mad eyes of Crystal City's scarred alcalde told him that undying hatred had guided him to the shanty.

"What ar' yer goin' ter do?" asked the Rolling Stone.

"Shoot yer cheek off!—make yer beauty equal ter mine!" was the answer. "We'll then be ther two Scarred Daises ov Arizony!"

It was the most critical moment in Cactus Claude's life. The wound already received had strangely weakened him; he had been supported by two men from the dueling-ground to his cabin; he could not be expected to cope with the man who had thus taken such sudden advantage of him.

"You can't wait till we can fight that duel on an equality," said Cactus Claude.

"We kin never be equals ag'in, I feel that my wound is goin' ter destroy ther sight ov one eye. By blowin' your cheek off I kinder even up, Cactus; I put yer on a par with me as ter personal beauty."

A wild half-insane laugh followed the last sentence, and Cactus Claude felt the revolver press closer against his cheek.

"I'm not hyer ter kill. I don't want ter do thet," Bullion Burke went on.

"You had better," grated the Rolling Stone, in defiance and despair.

"Think so?"

"I know it!"

"Mebbe I will! In ther first place what do you know about Berta?"

"More than you can find out!" was the answer.

"She came from St. Louis, didn't she?"

"That is your guess, eh?"

"I've got it down ter a certainty almost."

A smile stole to Cactus Claude's face, but it did not remain. As it fled, he shut his lips and looked into the eyes above him.

"This has got ter end, Cactus," said Bullion Burke. "I'm goin' ter do ther deed thet brought me hyer. One cheek's enough for men like us, an' we'll hev plenty with that. Five I count, for form's sake. It'll give yer time for preparation for ther bullet might dash ter ther center!"

The alcalde had scarcely finished before a human figure reached the door now half open.

The lamp on the bracket against the wall showed this person the two men on the cabin cot.

He seemed to take in the situation in the twinkling of an eye.

All at once he leaped over the threshold, and caught the big alcalde at the back of the neck.

"I have business with the man you want!" he exclaimed, and with the strength of a young athlete he jerked Bullion Burke back and pushed him from the shanty before he got even a glimpse of the lightning assailant.

"Does he want to fight yet?" asked the newcomer, leaning over Cactus Claude whose eyes showed his surprise.

"Jack!" exclaimed the Rolling Stone.

"That is who I am, Cactus," was the reply. "I am here for some information which you can give me. Where is Berta?"

The Rolling Stone raised himself on his elbow.

"You've done me a big favor, boy," he said, "and I'll give you a chance. Ther girl's gone ter Tucson with Tony."

Jack sprung up with a cry.

"To Tucson with him?" he ejaculated.

"You can't overtake 'em now," continued Cactus Claude. "Wait till mornin' if ye'r goin' ter play any hand. They're goin' ter stop thar."

"Your hand is in this," flashed Jack. "I'm sorry—"

"That you came hyer in ther nick o' time an

pulled Bullion Burke off?" interrupted the Rolling Stone, with a chuckle. "I can't say that I regret their occurrence. Two cheeks are better than one all the time. When did yer diskiver that the girl was gone?"

"Awhile ago. The stable gave you away. I—"

At that moment a heavy blow fell upon the door which Jack had shut after Bullion Burke.

"Know all men that hyer on earth that's a day of judgment!" cried a loud voice.

Then all was still.

CHAPTER XI.

COYOTE'S SECRET.

"NEVER mind. Mebbe I'll spoil his beauty yet," growled the discomfited alcalde, as he walked in no good-humor from Cactus Claude's cabin. "I told 'em both that hyer on earth that's a day of judgment, an' I'll make every word good!"

It is not for us to follow Bullion Burke back to his cabin, where he could vent his spleen in curses upon the Rolling Stone and Jack who had come upon the scene in the nick of time.

The big alcalde had always hated Jack, and it had galled him to discover that between the youth and Berta existed a tie stronger than friendship. Now he hated Jack more than ever, and nothing but the fear of a cocked revolver and a steady hand had prevented him from rushing back into the cabin from which he had been ejected.

The next day Bullion Burke heard a bit of news that made his eyes flash.

Thirty men had left Crystal City in a body, going toward Tucson, but with an announcement that they would not stop there, but would keep on until they found another place to settle down.

These thirty men belonged to the gang that had wiped Keno Bar out of existence, and the alcalde knew that fear of Kit King had driven every one from camp. The silent killings of the night before had struck terror to their hearts, desperadoes though they were; they could not remain with the shadow of an avenger who came in the dark watches of the night hovering over them.

Not one came to bid Bullion Burke farewell before he left. They knew the ill-humor of the rough blade whose personal looks had been spoiled for life by the avenger's bullet, and they concluded that he should curse their departure to their backs.

The alcalde flew into a passion when he heard of the desertion. He appeared on the streets governed by a whirlwind of rage and with a cocked six-shooter in each hand.

"If thar ar' any more cowards let 'em go!" he cried, facing a crowd congregated before the Mountain Dew Hotel. "We want all men who tremble when they see their shadders ter sneak out o' camp an' leave only ther brave!"

"Cap'n, can I have a word with you?" said a man who reached the alcalde's side as he spoke.

"Sartainly, Robert," was the reply. "But wait till I've emptied my cuss-trap an' ease myself. Is ther case urgent?"

"Not very. Go ahead, cap'n."

The crowd knew that another outburst of anger was coming, and some of their members exchanged smiling glances.

In western phraseology, Bullion Burke "let himself out" during the next three minutes.

He walked up and down before the rough assembly and swung the heavy revolvers in the face of all, while he gave utterance to the strongest language ever heard in Crystal City. It was fun for the crowd who knew the character of the talker, and he was permitted to go on until, suddenly recollecting that Wild Robert wished to see him, he wound up with a profane peroration.

"A man with his beauty spoiled for life isn't expected ter be found in good-humor," remarked Dakota Dave when the wounded alcalde walked off.

Bullion Burke took Wild Robert straight to his cabin and did not address him until they had crossed the threshold.

"Now, Robert, what is it?" he said.

Before he spoke the miner rough glanced at the door; it was closed.

"Cap'n, I'm goin' ter tell yer a secret an' then I'm goin' away," he said.

Bullion Burke looked astonished.

"You ain't goin' ter play coward, too, ar' yer?" he cried.

"Coward?" echoed the rough. "I've never played that yet. But I've finished my mission, an' Crystal City has no further claim on me. Cap'n, I am Coyote."

The alcalde started as if the announcement that Satan was at the door had suddenly been made.

"Coyote?—the man who shot ther colonel?—you?" he cried, looking at Wild Robert.

"I am Coyote," was the answer, spoken with a smile. "Listen. I won't keep yer a minute. Colonel Wonder was my enemy. For ten years I have been on a little trail of my own, and until ther night I shot ther colonel I war not sartain he war ther man I wanted. When I found it out I had ter kill 'im; I could do nothin' else. I shot through my pocket an' thet's why nobody saw ther work. It war an old shootin' trick ov mine; I earned it years ago in ther Californy camps. I'm not very handy with a pen, cap'n, but thar's ther story ov my cause. I sot up till arter midnight last night jottin' it down in mighty poor but devilish plain English."

Wild Robert drew from an inner pocket a packet tied untidily with a leathern string, and cast it upon the table beside the alcalde.

"If Crystal City wants my blood arter havin' read my story it kin hunt me up an' tussle for it," the man went on. "I'm goin' from hyer ter Tucson whar I intend ter stay five days at ther Prodigal Son Ranch owned by Major Belt. Ther girl an' Tony Timberlake hev gone thet way."

"What girl?" cried Bullion Burke.

"Berta."

The short reply seemed to take the desperado's breath.

"Gone off with that cocktail dude?" he exclaimed. "When did that happen?"

"A few hours ago between two suns," smiled Coyote. "They took Cactus Claude's hosses."

"With his consent ov course?" grated the alcalde.

"I think so."

"An' Jack?"

"He'll follow when he gits wind of the trick."

"We will see about that. So you ar' goin' ter Tucson?"

"Yes."

"Will you do me a favor? May I ask Coyote ter play a hand thar for Bullion Burke?"

"I've no objection, cap'n."

"If they ar' thar they must go no further. I want that young thief an' ther girl separated at once an' both held till I kin lay hands on 'em. Major Belt is boss ov Tucson now. I hev a slight acquaintance with him. He will help you, Coyote; by heaven! he shall! Crystal City shan't come back on you for ther shootin' ov ther colonel. I'll stand between you an' ther pards hyer."

"Mebbe you'd better read my document first," said Coyote glancing at the paper lying at the alcalde's hand.

"When you're gone, Coyote. You're ther last man in Crystal City. thet I'd hev taken for ther man who wiped ther colonel out. An old feud, eh? I've got one ter settle myself."

"With ther man from Keno Bar?"

"With Cactus Claude!" flashed Bullion Burke.

Coyote held out his hand, which the alcalde took, and looked into his face.

"Ar' yer never comin' back ter Crystal?" he asked.

"Never, I guess. My one enemy is dead. I shan't stop long enough this side o' ther coast."

"Remember! Ther girl is ter be detained in Tucson, forcibly if necessary. As for Tony, if he attempts any fool plays give him the trigger."

Coyote shook his head.

"One man was my quota. I'm satisfied with that," he said.

"Tell ther major, then. Say thet I will be in Tucson inside o' three days. At all hazards ther girl must be kept thar. Why she's worth—no difference what! She must stop in Tucson till I show up!"

The hands of the two men fell apart and the next moment Bullion Burke, Alcalde of Crystal City, was alone again.

He naturally picked up the paper Coyote had thrown upon the table. Untying the leather strings he unfolded the document, read a few lines, stopped and looked up with wonder in his eyes.

"Hades an' horns!" he exclaimed. "I never thought we had that man in camp. He hasn't got off yet. I'll go to ther end ov this dockement an' then I'll stop him if I have ter do it with lead."

He read on across the rough paper, and over the large letters which had been formed by a hand not used to the pen.

"Coyote! an' more than that!" cried Bullion Burke. "He had a right ter drop ther colonel if his account is true. This story ends where Kit King's work began; those two men are

strangely connected, and the man from Keno Bar knows nothing ov it. I've heard ov strange tales being spun out on paper by fellers who knew how, but this takes 'em all down! Stop the girl in Tucson if he finds her thar? Not much! I recollect that he made no promise ter do it, but told me ter read this paper. Whar is he now?"

Bullion Burke thrust the paper between two logs and bounded toward the door. An oath was on his lips, and his eyes seemed to emit sparks of fire.

Men looked wonderingly at him as he rushed toward a row of low cabins at one end of the camp. They were the stables where the horses of the mountain toughs had been saddled for the red ride to Keno Bar.

A man came out of one of the little structures as the mad alcalde came up.

"Has Wild Robert been hyer?" asked Bullion Burke.

"He saddled his hoss and rode off ten minutes ago."

The alcalde looked thunderstruck.

"A little too late," he said, under his breath.

"He left some word for yer, cap'n," said the man in the door.

"For me? What was it?"

"He said he hoped ther paper he left behind with you war no surprise."

The brow of the mountain alcalde suddenly darkened.

"He would be the surprised man if he hadn't made himself scarce!" he hissed. "He said he intended ter remain four days in Tucson. He does that at the risk of his life! Bring my horse to my door within twenty minutes. I intend ter show this smart Aleck of Arizona that he let his secret out too soon."

And the boss of Crystal City walked off, stared at by the man, who wondered whether the lost cheek had not shattered his senses.

CHAPTER XII.

DAKOTA'S DEATH-WATCH.

"I've got ter transfer ther game ter Tucson or elsewhar," said Bullion Burke, as he walked back to his cabin from his trip to the stables after Coyote, who had been too quick for him. "This galoot has let out his secret a little too soon for his own good. Thar ain't a dull line in his document, an' if I had known yesterday what I know now, ther hull programme would hev been changed."

He looked toward Cactus Claude's cabin, and his eyes settled there with a defiant glare. He thought he saw the face of the Rolling Stone at the little window beside the door, but he was not certain.

While he looked he recalled his visit to the wounded man, his attempt to shoot his cheek off, and the youth who came in the nick of time and baffled him.

"I'll pay ther boy for thet puttin' in!" growled the alcalde. "I ought ter do it afore I go. By ther eternal Jove, I will!"

He walked toward the little shanty occupied by Jack, and stalked in without a show of ceremony. But the place was empty, and told by the silence that greeted him that Jack had gone away.

Bullion Burke dashed off an oath or two and turned home.

"Dakota, I'm goin' off," he said to the man who greeted him beyond the threshold. "Hyer! look at my face afore I go, an' see if it needs any additional doctorin'."

The surgeon of Crystal City showed his astonishment by his looks.

"Goin' away?" he said, seemingly without the least effort, as if the words were the echo of Burke's voice.

"Goin' off! My hoss will be hyer in ten minutes. I'm off for Tucson."

"Hev yer found Kit King's trail?" asked Dakota Dave.

"Kit King be hanged!" growled the alcalde. "If he comes while I'm gone, Crystal must take keer ov him. I think ther cowards hev all left. Now look at my face."

Bullion Burke sat down and turned to the light.

"I've got an idea that he 'll come," said the tawny surgeon at work on the bandages. "He'll hev ter come soon if he wants ter finish Cactus."

A gleam of fierce pleasure lit up the alcalde's eyes.

"Is Cactus goin' under with ther wound he got?" he asked.

"It looks thet way," was the reply. "I've just come from him. Something happened a few hours ago, but he won't give me a single p'inter. It has excited him, an' his restlessness

has brought on a fever thet'll do 'im up within twenty-four hours."

"Is he out o' his head?"

"Not all ther time, cap'n."

The next moment Bullion Burke's hand closed on his surgeon's wrist and the eyes of the two men met.

"Look hyer, Dakota. I'm goin' ter ask a favor," the alcalde said. "When Cactus goes I want you ter be ther only livin' bein' with him. Worm yerself into his good graces, an' make yerself his father confessor. You understand?"

"What does Cactus know?" asked Dakota Dave.

"An almighty sight thet is important," said the boss of Crystal City. "Say ter him wnen ther end is at hand that you don't like a hair ov my head, though yer needn't put it quite thet strong, mebbe; tell 'im thet if he has anything he wants done hyerafter ter trust it ter you, an' if he wants yer ter swear eternal secrecy swear it, Dakota. Don't let him die without a confession."

"About what?"

"I know I kin trust yer Dakota; about ther girl!"

The gold-camp surgeon gave a slight start.

"I must know what he knows," continued Bullion Burke. "Get his confession solid an' we'll realize big out out ov it. I am goin' ter Tucson whar I'll be likely ter find her."

"Berta?"

"She left camp with Tony Timberlake ther cocktail seraph ov ther Mountain Dew. It astonished me when I heard it, but when I discovered that Cactus's hand war at ther bottom ov it all I begun ter think. Go ter work on my face, Dakota; ther boss will be hyer d'rectly an' I will be off."

The face of the surgeon told that he would like to have asked the alcalde something about the exact confession expected from Cactus Claude, but the command was explicit about dressing the wounded face and he went to work.

When he had finished a fine iron-gray horse was brought up to the cabin door, and Bullion Burke, equipped for his ride to Tucson, climbed into the saddle.

"Get all he knows, Dakota," he said, leaning toward the man on the ground. "Remember! when Cactus Claude pulls out for deathland you must be ther only person present. I leave all the arrangements ter you. If he jabbers about anything besides the girl switch him over ter thet one track an' keep 'im thar till death trumps his ace. If Kit King ov Keno Bar should come in the mean time, he must be 'tended ter by ther revolvers ov Crystal. Under no circumstances must he be permitted ter finish ther Rollin' Stone."

"Trust me for ther hull game, cap'n," was the response. "I'm as anxious ter hear what he knows about Berta as you ar'."

"Big pay for good work," said Bullion Burke, as he took up the lines and rode off. "This is ther gold crisis in yer life, Dakota. Don't let ther bonanza slip."

The Arizona surgeon watched the alcalde until he disappeared.

"I'd like ter know how he got onter Cactus Claude's secret if he has one," he murmured. "While they've been pardes for many a year they've never been friends enough ter give each other a grip on ther secrets. A secret about Border Berta, eh? I don't mind hearin' thet. Why didn't he put Zocco, his dead dwarf pard, onter it long ago? Ah, mebbe he did an' Cactus beat 'im."

As the day wore away with Bullion Burke on the road to Tucson City, Dakota Dave paid strick attention to the patient he had on hand.

He had not judged wrongly when he said that Cactus Claude had suddenly taken a turn for the worse.

The giant of Crystal City and the man whose constitution was iron-like in its make-up, had been seized with a fever which promised to make short work of him in connection with the wound inflicted by Kit King of Keno Bar.

In medical matters Dakota Dave was the law of the camp, and he had but to tell the toughs that Cactus Claude should see no one but his doctor to have his patient all to himself.

Having worked this scheme to his satisfaction, he proceeded to watch the Rolling Stone with unwearied eye and no word passed his lips that he did not hear.

"It is comin' as certain as fate," Dakota Dave ejaculated, as night drew on. "I'd bet my head thet Cactus can't live through ter-night. It's ag'in' ther cards for him ter do it. I'll be likely ter get ther secret some time twixt now an' mornin', and when Bullion comes back I'll hev ther hull lay-out for him."

Dakota Dave had a restless patient, and one very hard to handle. Excitement had worked the Rolling Stone into a fever that was rapidly taking him off. At intervals he was in his right mind, but nearly all the time he raved about men and places of which the eager surgeon had never heard.

More than once, Dakota Dave hinted to his patient that he had a poor chance to recover, but the iron will of the man would assert itself, and he would declare, sometimes with a border oath, that he had "too much to live for" to die then.

On the rough table near the pallet occupied by Cactus Claude, lay a cocked revolver, which Dakota Dave had placed there to use in case he should be disturbed by any visitor when the supreme moment came. He had resolved to get Cactus Claude's secret at all hazards.

It was a sight enough to stir one's blood to see this man leaning over the person lying on the cot waiting like a ghoul for the throes of death. The lamp on the table showed Dakota Dave the tensely drawn and burning face of the Rolling Stone, and his fingers would steal to his pulse, which gave certain indications of approaching dissolution.

The waning minutes told off the life of the giant rough, and Dakota Dave watched him with an eagerness that bordered on crime.

Nobody came to disturb his vigils, and while he waited for death he listened for the footsteps of the spy, or the stealthy tread of an enemy.

More than once it took all of Dakota Dave's strength to hold Cactus Claude upon the pallet from which, in his delirium, he made desperate efforts to escape. These efforts always left the patient weaker, and a surer prey to the destroyer.

The end seemed to come about ten o'clock.

The camp was still about the little cabin, as if the mountain touhs had drawn off to let Cactus Claude rest undisturbed.

Twenty men armed with Winchesters and revolvers guarded the camp against the one man it most feared. They feared that the avenger of Keno Bar would come back and reduce the list he had posted under the lamp before the hotel, and it was for him that the twenty cool blades watched owl-like eyes and fingers at the trigger.

Dakota Dave was in trouble lest, when the end came, for Cactus Claude, he would be found in delirium, and thus pass off with the all-important secret sealed in his bosom.

This was the only fear that troubled the surgeon and rough of the gold-camp.

For a long time the Rolling Stone seemed to lay in a death stupor, but Dakota Dave with his hand at the pulse knew that the awakening would find him out of the delirium once more.

Cactus Claude started up suddenly.

"I give up, Dakota," he said, catching the unwearied eye of the man above him. "I'm goin' ter cross."

"An' mighty soon, Cactus," said the surgeon-tough. "If thar's anything on yer mind—anything I kin do afterward—any hand I kin play out, don't stop ter say so. I'm no leech for Bullion Burke; he sarved me a shabby trick once, an' in ther duel afore ther Mountain Dew, I war with you, Cactus."

The Rolling Stone looked into the speaker's face, and seemed to weigh his sincerity by his eyes.

"I don't see why I shouldn't give it ter you, Dakota," Cactus Claude resumed, as if he was satisfied with his would-be confessor. "What I want ter let slip is about ther girl I sent ter Tucson with Tony. Whar's Bullion?"

"In his shanty, I reckon," said Dakota Dave, without hesitation. "About ther girl—Berta—is it? What is it?"

Cactus Claude raised himself on his elbow, and was silent for a moment.

"That girl is more than Berta ov Crystal City," he went on. "Let me see; it war how many years ago?"

"No matter about that, Cactus. Give me ther facts in ther case. Who is ther girl?"

"Ye'r almighty eager!" said the Rolling Stone, fixing a look of suspicion upon Dakota.

"It is because if you don't hurry up, ye'll be gone; that's why," was the answer. "It's nothin' ter me individually, Cactus, but—"

He stopped, sprung back and wheeled.

"My God! You?" he exclaimed, darting toward the table.

"It is I!" was the answer that made the Rolling Stone rivet his gaze on the speaker. "I will take charge of this man myself, Doctor Dakota. If you lift hand or voice, by the arching heavens! I'll paint these walls with your brains."

Dakota Dave stood still, as well he might. He was looking over a revolver into the eyes of the Last Man of Keno Bar.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LAST MAN'S PRISONER.

THERE was something startlingly cool in the appearance of the Last Man at the death-watch. He had run the gantlet of Winchesters that guarded the camp, and Dakota Dave, the surgeon-tough, was looking into his revolver.

Cactus Claude, from his pallet on the floor, saw the man who had given him his wound, and his eyes flashed madly while they glared at him.

The tableau, revealed by the greasy tin lamp on the table, was certainly a striking one.

Kit King had no cause to repeat his threat, for Dakota Dave understood it.

"I'm hyer if yer want me," said Cactus Claude, still eying the representative of Keno Bar. "If you had come sooner, you wouldn't hev had an easy victory. Git down hyer, if yer dare, an' feel ther wrist thet used ter hold out a six-shooter an' never quake. An' listen ter ther sound in my throat now an' then."

Kit King took a step nearer, and Dave involuntarily recoiled.

Suddenly the avenger's hand darted toward the table and closed on the revolver lying there. It took away the surgeon-tough's last hope of defense.

"I have come for this man," said King, glancing down at Cactus Claude.

"For me, eh?" exclaimed the wounded sport.

"For you!"

"Hyar I am—at your mercy. You can't cheat me out o' much life. I'm about wiped out."

"There may be healing beyond this mountain den," said Kit, with a smile at his lips while he spoke.

Dakota Dave's look became a stare.

What did these words mean?

"You will remain where you are," the avenger continued, addressing him. "I am going to take this man away."

"Out o' this shanty?" cried the surgeon-tough. "Why, he's no more able ter go than a sick child!"

"I want no advice. If I am not mistaken, you are Dakota Dave, and your name is on the list at the hotel. Thirty cowards have left camp. They couldn't wait till I came back. Ha! ha!"

With the laugh still on his lips, Kit King stooped and touched the wounded man's shoulder. "Come," he said; "I did not come here to stay."

"I tell yer he can't—"

The revolver suddenly covered Dakota Dave again; it seemed to leap at him with the ire of a tiger.

"Another word while I'm in this house, and I'll drop you in your boots!" came over the polished barrel.

Cactus Claude seemed to possess unnatural strength despite his condition.

"I'll go with yer if it's ter sartain death," he said, with a glance at the Crystal City pard, as he raised himself to a sitting posture. "What matters whar I die? Take me whar you please, Kit King."

In less than a minute the Rolling Stone was on his feet.

"Help him put on his coat," the Last Man said to Dakota Dave. "Can you stand it, Cactus?"

"I kin!" and the big tough shut his teeth as if to keep back the painful cries that seemed powerful enough to rend him. "When ther time comes, you'll find Cactus Claude dyin' game."

The coat was put on with the surgeon-tough's assistance, and Kit King caught Cactus Claude's arm as he showed signs of losing his balance.

"He can't walk out o' camp," said Dakota Dave, unmindful of Kit King's last threat.

"He is not to walk further than the door," was the answer, and the next moment the Last Man was escorting the Rolling Stone from the cabin.

Looking across the threshold as the door was opened Dakota Dave saw the outlines of a horse, and in an instant guessed it all.

"This man has beaten the guards," he said to himself. "Mebbe he killed one or two before he got hyer. After all, Kit King is gettin' ther best ov Crystal City."

The avenger led Cactus Claude with rather tottering step to the horse. The surgeon-tough, full of curiosity, followed to the door. The com-

ing of Kit King had cheated him out of the secret for which he had watched all day by the Rolling Stone. If he was permitted to lead Claude away it would be lost forever.

The thought was galling, and made Dakota Dave bite his lips.

"This is your horse," said Kit, seeing the look Cactus Claude bestowed on the steed standing in the starlight with rein lying loosely on his shapely neck.

"Mine ter ride ter death, eh?" smiled Cactus Claude, looking at the cool-blade.

"I don't know," was the reply. "We are off now, if you will let me help you to the saddle."

"Help?" laughed the alcalde's rival. "No man ever helped me thar yet!"

And, to the utter surprise of the two men, he vaulted into the leathern saddle without assistance, and gave Kit King a look of triumph as he settled there.

"You can spread the news through Crystal City whenever you wish," said King to Dakota Dave. "If you do, I promise to remove your name next from the list. Do as you please, Dakota Dave."

"That's jes' what I always do," the camp surgeon said, in reply.

Kit King placed himself at the horse's head, took the bridle-rein in his left hand and led the animal away.

"Thar's no doubt of it now," muttered Dakota Dave. "That man killed somebody ter get hyer."

He stood in the cabin door and saw the two men slowly disappear, and when he started off it was toward the Tiger's Claws where he hoped to find a dozen of Crystal City's toughest people.

Let us follow the cool man who had come into the jaws of death and taken thence a living man.

Not a word was exchanged by the twain until the camp was left behind, for, singular to relate on the trail taken by Kit King, no Vigilantes opposed him, and Cactus Claude found himself "beyond the lines," and still in the power of the man who had taken him.

"How are you now?" asked Kit King as he stopped the horse half a mile beyond the camp, and looked up into his prisoner's face.

"I don't feel so much like dyin' as I did back in ther shanty," was the reply. "I guess ther air's got suthin' ter do with it. My pulse ain't so high as it war."

"I'm glad of that," said Kit King.

"You're a puzzle, you ar'," retorted Cactus Claude. "What d'yer know?"

"About what?"

The Rolling Stone evidently found himself caught; he was going back to the secret which Dakota Dave had played for.

Kit King looked at his prisoner with a queer expression, half-laugh and half-frown.

"I have just found out a good deal, Cactus," he said. "I searched Bullion Burke's hut awhile ago and found a queer paper. I think—I am almost certain—it is the document that took him from Crystal City a few hours ago. That paper is a chain with one or two important links missing. I think you can supply them, Cactus."

"I?" exclaimed the Rolling Stone. "I never heard ov you until you turned up as the Last Man of Keno Bar."

"I'm not talking about myself," said Kit King. "I want to know about the girl."

This time Cactus Claude started so violently that he almost fell from the saddle. The Last Man steadied him with one hand.

"About—the—girl?" he asked. "That means Berta."

"Yes; Border Berta you call her sometimes."

There was a silence of several minutes on the Rolling Stone's part.

"This man wants the same secret Dakota Dave was so eager to clutch," he said to himself. "This man shot me and brought me to death's door. If he will be fair with me I will play fair with him."

Then he said aloud to Kit. "What'll you tell me if I tell you a secret?"

"What do you want to know?"

"All thet war on ther paper you found, an' who you ar', an' why you want ter know about Border Bert."

"Agreed!" cried the Last Man. "Tell me your secret first, and then you shall have all I know."

We are not going to afflict the reader here with the long story told by Cactus Claude as he sat in the saddle and looked into the upturned and eager face of his single auditor. It was the story of the secret played for by Dakota Dave, the surgeon-tough, the secret wanted so badly by Bullion Burke.

He was not interrupted once; a narrator never had a better listener.

When he reached the end of his story there was a silence of several minutes.

Kit King looked toward Crystal City before he spoke.

"Very well. You want my story now," he said.

"I war ter have it."

"Here it is. I believe I am Border Berta's brother."

"You?—you her brother?" cried the Rolling Stone. "By heavens! I can't believe that!"

"Your story almost confirms it. There is yet one missing link. You sent her to Tucson to become the wife of that young rascal Tony Timberlake. Do you think Major Belt will carry out your commands?"

"I think he will, but now I wish he would not."

"If he has I will divorce the pair and then—"

He looked madly toward Crystal City again.

"Then what?" asked Cactus Claude.

"Then I'll come back and avenge Keno Bar to the letter of my oath."

CHAPTER XIV.

MAJOR BELT AND BERTA.

WE transfer the reader to Tucson. Tucson with its wild ways and conglomerate population.

We enter one of the best houses in the town, a city one would call it were he describing it as it is at the present day, and usher ourselves into a room luxuriously furnished for Tucson.

The room is occupied by a young girl whose figure is shapely and whose beauty is striking.

Having said this much it is needless to inform the reader that Border Berta has reached Tucson, and, if this is true, Tony Timberlake her escort cannot be far away.

Night has fallen over the capital of the southwestern territory, the lamps have been lighted, and the gambling dens are in full blast, fleeing the miners and mountaineers, and replenishing the pockets of the card-sharps.

The girl is alone when we enter the room she occupies, but she does not remain so long.

Suddenly the door opens, and a man who, in his make-up and appearance shows the sport, stands before the waif of Crystal City.

Commanding in person and molded like a giant, with intensely black eyes and long hair, the girl's visitor attracted her gaze from the first.

"This is Major Belt," flashed across the waif's brain. "This is the man to whom Cactus Claude has sent me for a purpose of his own."

Tony Timberlake did not make his appearance with the giant sport, and Berta's visitor came forward with a smile, as if he saw that the girl was wondering what had become of her escort.

"I am Major Belt," said the man. "You are Border Berta, I presume. You have just reached Tucson."

"I have not been here an hour," was the answer. "I came in with a young man who escorted me thither at the command of Cactus Claude. I don't know why he sent me, but I know that I was sent to you for a purpose of some kind. They call you Major Belt. That is not your true name. Like half of the men of the Southwest, you have two names. Your real name is Silas Shane."

The man seemed to clear the space between Berta and himself with a single bound.

"Who told you this?" he cried, and one of his hands fastened on the girl's arm like the tentacle of an octopus. "As you value your safety do not mention that name in Tucson again! I am Major Belt; remember that. Who told you that I am not?"

"Some secrets are not very well kept," said Berta, who could not help smiling at the big man's excitement. "When I discovered that I was being sent to you, I did not threaten to escape from my escort. Are you going to carry out Cactus Claude's commands?"

"Why not?"

"What are they?" asked the girl.

Major Belt laughed.

"Do you want a husband, my mountain beauty?" he exclaimed. "You're pretty enough to reign as the gold queen of Frisco or New York. We will give you a husband in short meter, an' astonish the Tucsonites—"

"You?" cried the girl, coloring deeply as she shrunk instinctively from the Tucson sport.

"No, not me, though I wouldn't object to becoming the husband of a magnificent beauty like yourself. Have they any more like you in Crystal?"

The girl's eyes were flashing before the Tucson giant; he rather enjoyed it.

"I might buy the fortunate man off," he went on. "I don't know that he'd sell out cheap, but I'm not bankrupt by a long shot. You'd show off better as Mrs. Major Belt than as the wife of the Crystal City lamb."

"Tony Timberlake?" exclaimed Berta, an expression of scorn asserting itself. "Am I to become the wife of that young man?"

"That's the order," smiled Major Belt.

"From Cactus Claude?"

"Yes."

"And you intend to carry it out?"

"I must."

"When?"

"As soon as possible."

"I did not think that Major Belt was under the thumb of a man like Cactus Claude," said the girl. "Some link unites you men, and he has but to apply the thumbscrews to make you obey him. When did he first get you in his power?"

"I am in no man's power!" flashed the Tucson sport. "The man does not live who will stand here and make a charge of that kind!"

"But the woman does!" was the reply. "I can go out upon the streets of Tucson and make a proclamation that will make you a fugitive, or cause you to fight the Vigilantes within six hours. Tell me not that you are not in the power of Cactus Claude of Crystal City. He is miles away, but he has only to speak, to issue an infamous order, for Major Belt the boss of Tucson to carry it out without a show of pity or mercy. Go on. Attempt to make me the wife of any man against my will and we will see who plays the best hand in this game."

Major Belt looked dumfounded. The attitude of the girl who had planted herself firmly before him had an effect that seemed to paralyze him. He found himself between two fires either of which threatened the direst consequences.

"There's no use in carrying on this way," he said, at length, suddenly assuming his old brow-beating manner. "We will see that the commands of the captain are carried out. As for your threatened proclamation, girl, that will effect nothing in Tucson where I have a foothold that nothing can break. I've seen women play a hand of this kind before. If you are overly anxious to try your proclamation thar's the door, and out yonder's the street. I'll go with you and get you an audience."

Was this man really fearless? Was he anxious for Berta to give him a new name on the streets of Tucson?

"Not going to try it, eh?" he laughed after a moment's silence. "I guess the scheme wouldn't be a magnificent success. I am going to attend to the business on hand. Since you have showed your spirit in a manner I don't like I am going to see that you become the wife of Tony Timberlake."

There was no reply to this, for the resolution with which Major Belt spoke drove the girl back a pace, with a strange cry on her lips. The Tucson sport seemed to interpret it as an exclamation of despair.

"You will not leave this room till I come back," he went on, withdrawing toward the door. "I will not be alone when I return, therefore you will submit with the best grace possible. Tony mayn't be a fool after all, but I can't say that I like Cactus Claude's selection."

He ended with a laugh as he opened the door, and the girl sprung forward.

"Back!" he said, pausing on the threshold.

"This is Tucson, and I am boss here!"

Border Berta halted and drew back.

"Boss or not, these infamous commands of the head desperado of Crystal City shall never be carried out!" she exclaimed.

"Who's to prevent? You haven't a friend in Tucson, girl. You have come to a place where nobody interferes with my games. This town would die without its Major Belt. Don't beat your feathers off against the sides of the gold cage that holds you. Pluck up and become Mrs. Timberlake with a smile."

"Never!" said the beautiful girl.

"Mebbe you would compromise on me," grinned the sport.

"On you?" was the quick retort. "Better the young fool of Crystal than Silas Shane!"

The brow of the giant sport grew dark at the name, but with a derisive laugh, which was forced, he shut the door in Berta's face, and left her alone.

Let us follow him.

"Immediately after the ceremony she leaves Tucson," he said to himself. "She might get somebody here to believe her, and I can't afford to have my business spoiled by a girl. Hang it

all, why did Cactus Claude send her to me, when he could have played the game through himself? Where is the expectant husband?"

A few minutes later Major Belt entered one of the several faro rooms which he owned, and touched a young man, who followed him into a small apartment adjoining.

"She shows her pretty teeth, your girl does," he said, addressing the youth, who was Tony Timberlake.

"I feared she would, but that display isn't to interfere, I hope."

"No. I wish you hadn't wandered from the main trail on the way here. This circumstance cost you many hours of a good time; it has given somebody a chance to interfere if—"

Tony interrupted the faro king with an exclamation.

"Who has come?" he exclaimed. "Has Jack—"

"Nobody has come that I know of," was the answer. "I only say that your mishap has lost you much time. You should have kept the trail better. Cactus Claude thought you knew it."

"And so did I, curse the luck!" grated Tony. "The girl did not, of course, and when we got wrong she thought we were right."

"Let that go," said Major Belt. "Immediately after the ceremony you leave Tucson."

"To-night yet?" gasped the young schemer.

"To-night! The girl knows something. I don't want her here."

"Then shoot me for a gulch coyote, if I take her under such circumstances. I can't take her back to Crystal as my wife, and I don't know any other road out of this town."

"It is too late now!" cried the faro king, and his hand descended like an eagle upon Tony's shoulder. "I am going to carry out Cactus Claude's commands. I shall see that this girl becomes your wife and then I'll show you out o' town. Don't kick against the programme. It might do elsewhere, but it won't work in Tucson. I'll be back here in five minutes with the knot-tie. If you're not here I'll hunt you down and either marry you to the woman you've played for, or blow your head off. I'm the worst card in this Arizona deck!"

That was all, but it was enough for the frightened clerk of the Mountain Dew Hotel.

"Get your parson," he said; "I'll take the girl and the consequences."

CHAPTER XV.

BAFFLED AND SHOT.

FIVE minutes make up a very brief piece of time in the calendar of the years, but brief as it is, it is often long enough to change lives and throw a nation out of gear.

Major Belt intended to rejoin Tony Timberlake within the allotted time, and he had left the young man in a not very pleasant frame of mind although he expected to become the husband of a beautiful young girl in a little while.

A short time before a certain individual who seemed to be familiar with the "lay of the land" had come to Tucson. He was mounted on a splendid horse that obeyed the slightest pressure of spur and bit, and his eyes took in all the lighted windows and open doors as he rode along.

When in front of the Prodigal Son faro bank, which was the most prominent of the several owned by Major Belt, he rode toward the door, left the lines on his horse's neck, and entered.

There was nothing remarkable about this man; he looked like the usual run of rough characters who infest the wild towns of the Southwest border, but no one who took notice of him in the faro bank failed to see his keen eyes and almost silken hands.

He looked the crowd over with an eagle eye, and evidently not finding the person he wanted, inquired for Major Belt.

"The major, sir, may be in d'rectly, and he may not," said the person whom he addressed. "You might find him at the house, and you might not."

This was not very definite, but it took the man away. He was followed by some curious eyes to the door.

Outside, he walked down the street, followed by the horse, with his nose at his master's elbow.

"At the house, eh?" he ejaculated. "Mebbe I'm too late."

He appeared familiar with the location of the building called "the house" by the bartender of the faro bank, for he walked straight to the structure in which had just occurred the interview between Major Belt and Berta.

He walked up to the door, and was about to knock, when a footstep arrested his attention.

"Looking for me, eh?" said a voice, and the

next moment the man stood face to face with the faro king himself.

"I want ter see yer, major—a minute, on business."

Major Belt was accompanied by two persons, one a young man, the other a smooth-faced and somewhat clerical-looking individual of fifty.

The boss of Tucson stepped forward with his eyes fixed on the man at the door.

"I am Wild Robert from Crystal City," continued the stranger, lowering his voice a mite as he glanced at the major's companions.

"From Cactus Claude?" asked Major Belt.

"If from Crystal from Cactus Claude, of course," was the reply, spoken with peculiar emphasis.

"Good! you are here in time. We were just going to perform the ceremony according to orders. Come up, gentlemen. This person is fresh from Crystal, and he will witness the affair."

One of the two, the smooth-faced man, came forward without hesitation; the other seemed to hold back.

"Step up, Tony; the latest arrival isn't a grizzly from Crystal," laughed the major, but his voice had a certain sternness all the time.

"This is only Wild Robert and—"

"I know him!" interrupted Tony Timberlake, coming forward and with his thoughts on the many times the tough had drank at the bar of the Mountain Dew.

"Ho! it is you, Tony, sure enough," laughed Wild Robert, leaning forward. "Got hyer safe with ther girl, eh?"

"Yes, but we got lost on the way, and never got here until a while ago," was the reply, at which the man just in from Crystal City seemed relieved.

Major Belt led the way into the house, and to a room which he unlocked by taking a key from his pocket.

"Walk in, gentlemen," he said, throwing the door open. "After the ceremony, we'll adjourn to the Prodigal whar we'll slay the fatted calf, figuratively speaking."

Wild Robert was the first person to enter the room; he was followed by Tony, and then by the smooth-faced man, while the major brought up the rear.

A beautiful but white-faced girl awaited them. She glanced strangely at Wild Robert, seeing in him a person whom she had often seen in Crystal City.

"Gentlemen, thar's no use ter make a long performance ov this," said Major Belt. "This young lady is ter be married ter Mr. Timberlake here. The authority comes from one whose word is my law. The gentleman chosen will step forward."

The faro king looked at the young clerk, and stepped aside so as to give him passage to Berta, who stood like a statue by a chair.

"I have said that I will never be bound to that man!" she suddenly exclaimed, and her hand covered the young fellow who was about to advance. "Cactus Claude has no right to choose my husband for me. He sends his command to his tool, Silas Shane, and he carries it out like the menial that he is, with all his boasted authority."

"That's a part of the story she gave me awhile ago," said the major who had colored at the name spoken by the girl. "Nothing was to prevent this marriage, and nothing shall. Step up here, young man. You haven't forgotten what I said about your failure to do your part?"

Tony advanced, but it was a disagreeable duty.

"Who is this man?" suddenly asked Wild Robert, and his look covered the clerical-looking person to whom he had turned.

"He's all right," said Major Belt. "I've got a genuine preacher, though he hasn't slung Gospel for some time. That is the Reverend Holy Hicks, late of Nugget Bend."

"Nugget Camp, major; but it's all the same," prompted the sleek person, with a grin.

The girl shrunk to the wall.

"Will nobody protect me?" she exclaimed.

"My God! what have I done to fall into a fate like this? Left a waif years ago, must I meet misfortune at every turn? In the name of Heaven! men, have you no mercy?"

"Not much when Cactus Claude commands!" replied Major Belt coolly. "Take her hand there, Tony!"

"If you do, I'll kill you in your boots!"

The words fell upon three men's ears like the bursting of a bomb.

"I mean just what I've said," continued the speaker, and Wild Robert took a step forward, and covered the distance between him and the girl. "I wish to say here that I'll take charge ov this girl."

The man held two huge revolvers in the faces

of the major, Tony and the Reverend Mr. Hicks. The three simultaneously and instinctively recoiled.

"Ain't you for Cactus?" cried the astonished faro sport.

"I'm for myself an' this girl," was the reply. "Just afore I left Crystal, I gave Bullion Burke a document which told him that I am Coyote, the man who dropped Colonel Wonder at his card-table. I hev an idea thet Bullion, despite his one cheek, will try ter get ter Tucson ter play ag'in' ther hand I happen ter hold. I also told him in thet document that this girl is worth her weight in gold if safely landed in St. Louis, from which city she war taken years ago by Cactus Claude an' a pard named Silas Shane, now Major Belt, whom I have ther honor ter see before me. A fortune ov several hundred thousand awaits her thar."

"Jehosaphat!" ejaculated young Timberlake.

"Thar'll be no weddin' hyer just now," continued Coyote, still talking over his revolvers. "I am goin' ter take the girl home, though I think I could take her ter a relative who is closer than St. Louis. Cactus Claude's commands won't be carried out in Tucson ter-night, gentlemen. Mr. Hicks kin finish his engagement at Nugget Camp, an' Silas Shane kin wait for a man who is likely ter come with an easy trigger 'most any time."

"Who is he?" flashed the faro king.

"Wait an' see," smiled Coyote. "This ceremony will never take place. I am going from Tucson. I want ter go out o' town peaceably. I came in thet way, but if you want me ter go out like a whirlwind, I'll do it."

His dark eyes were a challenge as he fixed them on Major Belt, but their light softened when he turned them upon the girl.

"Come, Berta," he said. "If y u kin trust Coyote, we'll leave this vulture nest."

It was an animated tableau when Coyote walked toward the door, his fingers still at the trigger.

In a moment he was gone.

"That's cool, but see me play a cooler hand yet!" almost roared Major Belt.

The next moment came the sound of a crash, and the men who turned toward the window saw a broken pane.

"Silas Shane?" said a voice, as the face of a man appeared.

The revolver of Major Belt seemed to leap from his pocket as he went forward.

"This for the St. Louis crime!" continued the same voice.

Then there came a shot, and a man whirled and fell on his face.

The faro king of Tucson was dead!

CHAPTER XVI.

DOOM OF THE ALCALDE.

TONY TIMBERLAKE and the man from Nugget Camp stood spellbound in the smoke that came in through the shattered pane, and before the man lying on the floor.

"If you'll excuse me," said Holy Hicks, speaking first, "I'll vamose this ranch. It isn't healthy here."

"I share thet opinion," said Tony, drawing back and then turning toward the door. "I've lost every game I ever began, but this is the first time I was ever robbed of a wife. I can't go back to Crystal and face Cactus Claude."

"You'd better go with me."

"Are you going back to Nugget?"

"Bet yer life I am. I came up hyer for a recreation, but this isn't the sort I want. Let's get out o' town without lettin' Tucson know about this play. They'll find the major soon enough. Some fools might attempt to fasten the work on us, an' this is a place of swift nooses they say."

"No place like it on earth if all accounts be true," spoke Tony. "I'd give all I'm worth for a pair o' wings now."

In less than three minutes later the house was deserted by all save the dead.

Tony and Holy Hicks went down the street together and like two shadows. They kept on until they reached the outskirts of Tucson before a halt was made.

Tony felt like a fugitive.

"I b'lieve I'll go back an' tell the truth," he said to his companion.

"You go back?" cried the mountain parson. "They'll tear you ter pieces."

"They'll hunt us down anyhow for they know that we went to the house with Major Belt, so where's the difference? I'm not cut out ter be a successful fugitive from justice. I'll go back."

"Go an' may they noose you before you've half finished your story!" cried Hicks.

Tony went back.

"It's better to die with the truth on one's lips than to run away when you're innocent," were the words with which he consoled himself.

He did not get far before he knew that the discovery of the major had been made. The house was already surrounded by an excited crowd, and the young man heard his own name spoken in no very complimentary tones as he approached.

He went forward with the true account of Major Belt's death at his lips, but before he could begin the narrative he was espied by three men at once, and as many hands siezed him and held him fast.

In less than a second, it seemed, Tony found himself in the midst of a howling mob. Revolvers were thrust into his face, and twenty loud voices threatened him with instant death whether he told the truth or not.

Poor Tony! At that moment he wished himself with Holy Hicks, who was putting distance between himself and Tucson.

In the midst of it all, and just when the unlucky clerk of the Mountain Dew expected to see the flashes of a dozen revolvers, a man scattered the crowd before him and threw up his hand to command silence.

Tony started at sight of him.

"It is Kit King of Keno Bar!" ejaculated the young man.

The wild crowd shrunk instinctively from the handsome man who stood erect with no weapons in his hands; his eyes seemed enough to awe them all.

"I am the man you want, not this person," he said, laying his hand on Tony's arm. "The hand I have just lifted before you gave Major Belt, as you call him, Silas Shane as I now know him to be, his passport into eternity. Many years ago I lost a sister and a father on the same night. It was in St. Louis. Men hate there as here. Two men, now known as Cactus Claude and Major Belt, played out a well-formed game. A house was entered, a man was shot down and a girl, a mere child at the time, carried away. A son escaped by being absent. Strange to say I lived a long time within a few miles of the girl my sister. Accident revealed the true relationship; it told me that Cactus Claude and Major Belt, the man dead in that house, committed the crime which is still a mystery in St. Louis. My sister has just left Tucson in company with a man called Coyote, and followed by a youth who is capable of dealing with him if he proves stubborn."

"Jack!" said Tony Timberlake under his breath. "I'm glad I didn't meet the young galoat when he had steam up."

"I am the person who is responsible for Major Belt's death," continued Kit King, and he proceeded to tell the story of the destruction of Keno Bar, his work of vengeance, the list of the proscribed, the three-cornered duel in Crystal City and his ride to Tucson.

Scarcely had he finished ere a horse came down the street at a rapid gait, and two stalwart men stopped him before the crowd.

"Hello! hyer's a man draggin'!" exclaimed somebody.

There was a rush toward the horse, and Kit King who leaned forward uttered a cry of recognition.

"It is Bullion Burke!"

Bronze hands removed the swollen foot from the heavy stirrup, and the man whose face bore scarcely a semblance of humanity groaned.

The boss of Crystal was unconscious and evidently near his end, but a dash of the hottest brandy in Tucson revived him, and loosened the tongue bitten almost through.

It was no longer the handsome sport of Arizona; the long hair was matted and torn, the keen eyes half closed, the face a mass of shreds, but life still clung to the clayey tenement.

When he talked, it was the language of a man in delirium; he raved of scenes and times which were not known to Tucson, but here and there were incidents of his last ride, which Kit King understood.

"This man, eager to discover the secret of my sister's life, so well guarded by Cactus Claude, came here, despite his wounded face," he said, looking at the Tucsonites. "This horse, frightened at something, a bear perhaps, unseated him, and he had not strength enough to regain his place. Gentlemen, I am at your service. I have kept nothing back. You know the unwritten law of the Southwest; life for life, and blood for blood. The last man of Keno Bar has found the St. Louis villains. He did not expect to strike their trail when he set out to avenge the death of the twenty who fell around their cabins, because Keno Bar was hated by the friends of Crystal City. Silas

Shane, or Major Belt, lies in a little room dead, and the captain of the band that swooped down upon Keno is dying here. The list of the proscribed still hangs under the lamp, but half wiped out. The work of the Last Man is not finished. Coyote found his enemy in Colonel Wonder, and he killed him. He would now take my sister back to St. Louis, to the fortune, if not the home that awaits her there. I shall not follow until the pards who rode to Keno that one night, have passed the portals of the silent world!"

With one accord the listeners drew back.

Somebody said "Go," and there was no dissenting voice. The crowd seemed to consider Kit King more mad than sane.

"In a little while he was alone, no, not quite alone, for a man lay on the ground at his feet and a pair of wild eyes regarded him.

He got down and touched this man.

"Bullion Burke, this is the glory of Keno and the downfall of Crystal City," he said. "I am going to make your famous camp the abode of desolation. You played a bold game against Keno Bar, but the Last Man holds the big hand that wins in the end!"

The torn lips of the alcalde did not move, but the light of his eyes grew insanely bright. They became duller as they looked at Kit King, and when the Last Man rose they had no expression at all.

After awhile somebody came to where Bullion Burke lay, and found him silent and without a pulse.

It was all over with the Alcalde of Crystal, and the word went from lip to lip among the population of the Arizonian town.

As for Kit King, a man well-mounted rode slowly from Tucson. About a mile out he was halted and a young man came forward.

"Ha! Jack, is it you?" exclaimed the Last Man.

"It is Jack," was the reply of the youth also mounted. "Coyote and Berta are down the road a piece. The girl is anxious."

Kit King shook his head.

"Not till Crystal City has paid for Keno Bar!" he said, through his teeth.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE LAST MAN.

"It sounds more like a readin' from some novel than like ther solid truth," said a big man who sat at the faro-table of Cold Deck, a mining-town in southern Colorado, seven months after the events just narrated.

It was a wild, blustery night in midwinter, and the huge iron stove, red-hot in the center of the well-closed room, reddened the faces of the half-dozen men who had finished playing, and were listening.

"I happened in Crystal City at ther time," continued the speaker, and as he went on he told the story of Keno Bar and its mountain rival, the blotting out of one place and the vengeance that followed, events with which the reader is, in part, familiar.

The audience became eager listeners as he warmed with his story: he narrated everything in detail, as if he knew it from actual participation.

There was no Crystal City then, he affirmed. The hunt of Kit King had depopulated it, the pards who escaped his silent knife had fled, Heaven only knew whither, and the well-marked list was left to flutter in the wind under the lightless lamp of an abandoned hotel.

The few honorable people of Crystal City had left because the place was under the shadow of the knife of a man undoubtedly mad. After the exodus came a fire, which left only the Mountain Dew Hotel to mark the site of the gold-camp.

Cactus Claude had been found dead near the camp, and Bullion Burke died in Tucson. After that Kit King came back with his bowie and revolver, but he soon caused a panic in Crystal, and the pards scattered.

The man who told this story said that he had heard that the avenger was dead, that he had failed to carry out the oath of vengeance which he had taken over the ruins of Keno Bar. He (the story-teller of Cold Deck) had every reason for believing that the report was true.

If it was, he was the last man to drop a tear over Kit King, and he said this with flashing eyes.

"Look hyer, Monte," said one of the spectators; "aren't yer one ov ther fugitives from thet bowie?"

The story-teller started, and then laughed.

"Come! fess up!" cried the others. "A man couldn't know all you've told without havin' had a hand in that big game. War yer Monte thar?"

The man saw that he was "cornered" he laughed again and said:

"I'm one o' ther original fifty."

"Which one?"

"Dakota Dave, ther man who watched over Cactus Claude for his secret which I would have got if Kit King hadn't taken ther tough away."

A little silence fell over the party.

"You haven't seen Kit King since that night?" asked one, at length.

"No."

"Ar' you anxious to see the Last Man, Monte?"

"Can't say thet I am. Why should I be?" grinned the story-teller.

"Whether you want to see him or not, he is here!"

Monte sprung back, and was on his feet in a second. The man who had spoken last threw his hand to his face and jerked off a false beard.

Monte uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Ther Last Man, by the fires ov Hades!" he cried.

A table was between the two men, but Kit King went over it like a tiger at his prey.

The mountain men closed, there was a brief struggle, over which the spectators held their breath, and then, with a fury full of triumph, Monte was thrown toward the stove.

"They may cover their trails as they can, but the blood of Keno Bar has a scent that fails me not," said the avenger, facing the spectators. "I did not strike till I was certain of my man. I let him unmask himself. Gentlemen, I have deceived Cold Deck for ten days. I am Kit King, the Last Man of Keno Bar. Good-night, forever!"

He went to the door and threw it open. The wind blew a storm of snow into his face. It was the wildest night of a memorable winter.

In a moment he was gone, and the occupants of the little faro-den had a dead man with them to confirm the story of Keno Bar and Crystal City.

They never again saw the man whose life was a living vengeance.

When summer came a party of prospectors found in a deep ravine not far from Cold Deck the skeleton of a man, who had evidently perished there in a winter storm.

Near the bleaching bones of the right hand lay a rusted bowie, into whose hilt a number of notches had been filed, as if each one was the record of a life wiped out, and above the marks were the letters "K. K.," which, while they told the finders nothing, tell the reader the fate of the man who carried out to the letter the unwritten law of the wild Southwest.

There are still men scattered throughout that country who never speak of blotted-out Crystal City, nor mention Keno Bar—men who have changed their names, and who, in a court of law would swear against their true identity. Need we say that they are the few out of the fifty who owe their lives to the storm that left the Last Man in the ravine after the fate of Dakota Dave, the surgeon tough?

In the city of St. Louis a beautiful young wife surrounded by wealth and all the joys that love and gold can buy, waits with a sister's yearning for the Last Man of Keno Bar.

Her husband is a handsome young man who was once Jack, of Crystal City, and who went with her and Coyote from Tucson, leaving the dead behind.

Tony Timberlake, disappointed in love, is to be found behind the desk of a Far West hotel; but he never mentions his life in Arizona, and nobody would suppose that he had a hand in the greatest crime in its history—the blotting-out of Keno Bar.

Coyote is—I know not where. He saw Berta restored to her rights, and with ten thousand in his hands given freely by the young girl, he turned his back on the city and faced toward the wild Southwest again.

His hunt ended when the colonel died; but Kit King's red game will never be played out.

The identity of Zocco, the alcalde's dwarf spy was never satisfactorily settled, but it is generally believed that the two were brothers.

Although not many months have passed since the several plays of the game we have witnessed, the site of Keno Bar is unknown, and the only object that marks the location of Crystal City is a tumbling down building, once the famous Mountain Dew Hotel.

And in the rough weather-boarding stillsticks a bowie-knife whose hilt has been through the fire, but the paper it once pinned to the wood, Kit King's proscription list, disappeared long ago.

THE END.

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